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WILD LIFE AND ADVENTURE

IN THE

AUSTRALIAN BUSH.

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WILD LIFE AND ADVENTURE

IN THE

AUSTRALIAN BUSH:

FOUR YEARS' PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

BY

ARTHUR NICOLS, F.G.S., F.R.G.S.,

AUTHOR OF

"ZOOLOGICAL NOTES," "NATURAL HISTORY OF THE CARNIVORA," ETC.

WITH EIGHT FULL-PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS BY

JOHN T. NETTLESHIP.

IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. II.

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WILD LIFE AND ADVENTURE

IN THE

AUSTRALIAN BUSH.

CHAPTER I.

On the Road with Cattle—At the First Camp—Watching all Night—A Baking Day and a Drowsy March—The Rush for the Water-hole—Burnt Country—Thunderstorm and Stampede of the Cattle—A Headlong Gallop in the Dark—A Lightning-struck Tree—The Effects of a Tornado—Prospecting for Gold—Jimmy's Christmas Pudding—Home to Wallaroo—Hardships on the Journey—A Night with a Dead Horse—Johnny Cakes and Bear's Grease—Swimming the Flooded Maranoa.

It being now the middle of December, and little doing on the station, Humphreys decided to carry out the order of the butcher near Allora, for a mob of prime steers from the rich Wallaroo pastures. A hundred and fifty head of fat beasts were accordingly drafted out from the best mobs, and confined in the paddock until

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the next morning, when the overseer intended to start, with Harold, Joe, and another stockman as his assistants. Meanwhile, certain necessary preparation had to be made. Three working bullocks were brought up, and large bells attached to their necks. These old stagers, well accustomed to the road, would help to keep the youngsters steady, and their bells would indicate any movement of the cattle at night. Keene was busy all day weighing and measuring out the rations, which were to be loaded on two pack-horses, together with a frying-pan and a galvanized iron bucket, for cooking purposes, and an axe and a gun. Each man carried his own blanket strapped on his saddle-bow, and his billy and tin pannikin slung at the side.

"We can't smother the horses with things, Bertram," remarked the overseer. "The cattle will take all their time to manage. If you roll up a shirt in your blanket, for a change after a wet day, that'll be about all you want."

Harold thought this certainly a scanty equipment for a journey of two hundred miles, which

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would occupy some seventeen days; but the experience of his chief was not to be gainsaid. In case of accident to any of the mounts, three spare horses were placed in charge of the man, whose sole duty it would be to look after the pack animals, load and unload them, hobble them out at night, and bring them up in the morning, and do the cooking of the expedition. In consideration of these services (no light task, either), Jimmy would be exempt from all night watching, and get a small increase on his ordinary pay.

By the first streak of dawn, Jimmy had got the horses securely packed, and started on the road for the camping-place, nearly twenty miles from the head station, where he was to make the fire and get supper ready for the arrival of the drivers. The overseer planned a long march for the first day, in order to tire the cattle, and, crossing the Maranoa by the ford, intended to camp them some miles lower down, where a deep and wide stretch of the river separated them from the home to which they would make every possible effort to return.

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As soon as the mob were clear of the paddock gate, they made a desperate rush in the direction of their old feeding-grounds; and at one moment it seemed as though they would have succeeded in crossing the creek and joining their former companions on the flats, but the efforts of the drivers and dogs, and some of Joe's men, retained to see them well off the run, kept them among the timber, while the working bullocks, perfectly well aware now that they were on the way to the ford, led the van with their clanging bells at a steady trot. At frequent intervals throughout the day, the cattle, animated by a sudden impulse, broke back, and made a determined charge through the drivers, with their heads turned homewards. Whenever this took place, the overseer, after bringing them round, gave the mob a "buster" at a severe pace during the next half-hour, to take the wind out of them. Thus, by the middle of the day, tongues hanging out, and sweating skins, betokened some abatement of their vigour. Every now and then they would turn their heads in the direction of Wallaroo,

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and set up a concert of bellowing which made the forest ring. But the word was ever "onward;" no indulgence in regrets could be allowed. Never more would they drink of the limpid waters of Myall Creek. Their destiny was now the market at Brisbane, or possibly a voyage to Europe, soldered down in six-pound tins, labelled "Prime Australian Beef." Too much excited to feed, the beasts shambled on before the relentless stock-whips, and took their last taste of water in a small creek bordering the ground selected for the camp just as the sun was about to dip below the horizon.

Jimmy had already got the horses unpacked and hobbled out, the fire lighted, the water boiling, and a cut of damper and salt beef ready for each of the men to take in his hand and eat without dismounting.

"They're pretty well baked, eh, Joe?" said the overseer; "but we can't trust 'em to-night, anyhow. I expect it'll be watch all night for the three of us; though they might camp down a bit towards morning. Round 'em up now,

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and let's see how they take it—you" (to Harold) "keep about where you are."

The two men rode round to the head of the mob and turned them slowly. The working bullocks, seeing at once by this manœuvre that the day's journey was over, began contentedly cropping the grass in the little valley, only too glad to have a chance of eating something before dropping down to sleep, which they did in about an hour's time. Not so the others, however. They moved about in all directions, requiring the constant attention of the men, who rode slowly round them, letting their hungry horses take a bite now and then at the tufts of long wiry grass which grew in moist places.

"They're dead nuts on going home, Bertram," said Bill, cramming the damper and junk into his mouth at intervals, "but they won't tackle the river, that's certain; and when Jimmy's lighted three or four fires on this side, as I told him—ah, that's right, he's doing it now" (as a glimmer of light appeared at some little distance)—"we shall keep 'em together easier.

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But it's always risky work with strong cattle the first night. If anything startled them—they're that nervous, a rotten branch falling on the back of one of 'em might do it—we should have a handful in no time. That brindled dog of Joe's is first-rate—he's as good as another man any day, and quiet at his work, too. It's no use thinking of turning in to-night; so you go and get a drink of tea, and when you've had it come back, and I'll get one, too."

"What are my instructions, then?" asked Harold, on returning.

"You've only to keep moving round to the left till you meet Joe," replied Bill, "then back again here; and so on. Watch the cattle well. If you see any moving out between the fires, put 'em back gently; don't gallop, whatever you do; or shout either, unless you want help. Every now and then you will meet me at this end of the beat." And the overseer, leaving Harold in charge of the easiest place, went round to meet Joe, who reported the cattle a little easier, but none of them as yet lying down.

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By this time the last glimmer of twilight had disappeared, a thin young moon glinted low down through the trees, and overhead the stars bedecked the dark sky. For some considerable time nothing occurred to interrupt Harold's meditations on the beauty of the night, the novelty of the situation, and the pleasure of this free Bush life. His horse walked backwards and forwards at its own pace, and certainly dozed, if it did not go to sleep altogether at times. Just when he was thinking all these precautions a trifle excessive, he suddenly found himself confronted with a dark, slowly moving mass; and for the moment could not realize that it was a small bunch of cattle stealing out from the mob. They had heard only the sound of the horse's tread, which caused them no alarm; but at Harold's involuntary, suppressed exclamation, the beasts started back and disappeared in the darkness. He listened; but beyond some muffled mooing there was no indication of further disturbance. They had retreated to the main body.

Joe looked to the burning of the fires from

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time to time, and exchanged a whispered word or two with Harold when they met. So the night wore on. Warned by the cracking of twigs, he frequently found a few cattle endeavouring to make their way past him, but on his approach they returned to their companions. How was it possible, he thought, that any one could fail in watchfulness when engaged in such an interesting duty as this! Men had gone to sleep on the look-out at the masthead, and the ship had been wrecked. Many a soldier, worn out with fatigue, had paid the penalty of a moment's drowsiness with his life. And thus musing in the hot, still night, his thoughts wandered over the sea to Manor Farm, where at this moment probably the Yorkshire wolds lay deep in snow. How wonderful the contrast! Here the blue-black vault of heaven bespangled with stars shining mistily in the soft air; the weird forms of the tree tops stretching upwards to the sky; in a few hours to be flooded with the refulgence of the midsummer sun. And there, on the bleak, wind-swept hills of his native land—but, what's

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that great shout? He drew the reins tight, and strained his ears. It was no *shout*. The bellowing of a steer calling to his companions, "Come on, boys; now's your chance; nobody hereabouts." Mr. Harold Bertram, you did not know it, but the horse stopped, hung its head, and you (for how long, who can say?) fell to musing and dozing! Meanwhile a score of those cattle were creeping past your post, and very nearly eluded the sentinel. By good luck, he turned the horse in the right direction, and the contemplated flight was stopped.

"They seem fidgety here," said the overseer, riding up almost immediately; "but Joe tells me they are mostly lying down on the other side. If you like to go to the camp fire and roll up in your blankets for a couple of hours till daylight we can manage, I think, now."

"No, no-o, thank you," was the hesitating reply. "I can do very well—not at all sleepy," with a lurking suspicion that this ought to be taken strictly in the *present* tense.

The light of one of the watch-fires burned up for an instant behind Humphreys, throwing

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his massive frame into relief as he sat squarely in the saddle, smoking his short pipe. Not for a moment had this man's watchful attention abated since he mounted his horse, nearly twenty-four hours ago, and he was still keenly on the alert with all his energies braced for any emergency.

Jimmy was up, and had breakfast ready at dawn, each of the watchers taking his turn at snatching a pannikin of tea and something to eat before the cattle began to move off the camp. The pack-horses and spare mounts, all closely hobbled during the night, were soon driven in, and the saddles placed on the fresh nags, while those used on the previous day were allowed to take their place among the cattle. The overseer gave directions to Jimmy to follow along the bank of the river when he had loaded up the pack-horses, and the mob was soon wending its way towards the next halting-place—a short stage of ten miles. Tired and hungry, the cattle now devoted themselves to making up for the previous day's fast.

The calm morning promised to be followed

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by a hot day. So abundant had been the dew, that, in riding through a grove of wattle scrub, showers of drops were shaken from the feathery branches, drenching the men's shirts and trousers; but soon after the sun got fairly up the moisture vanished like magic from the grass and trees, and their clothes became dry as tinder.

The cavalcade crawled on through the fierce heat, now over rocky ridges which supported a scanty growth of stunted grass-trees, now across open flats covered with long, parched, wiry grass, and occasionally through ti-tree swamps, which contained only black, sticky mud and patches of broad-bladed grass, with edges as keen as knives.

They had left the fertile valley of the Maranoa for a tract of barren country stretching hundreds of miles to the north and south, which must be crossed before they reached the wooded ridges of the next watershed. Every one felt the tediousness of the march. Even the monotonous clanging of the bullock-bells was irritating, while swarms of sand-flies added to the

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discomfort of the dust raised by the cattle and the sweltering heat. Very welcome, then, was the sight of rising ground in the distance as the afternoon drew to a close.

The overseer rode on ahead to make certain of striking the lagoon—the only water within the next five miles—and, on returning, called a halt, that Jimmy might get on and prepare for camping at the spot marked by a circle of ti-trees, whose white stems could be seen from afar.

In an hour's time the mob was moved slowly on; but they soon began to quicken their pace until it became a gallop; and Humphreys exclaimed, "They're off, by jingo! They smell the water."

Away, helter-skelter, went the whole mob, flourishing their tails, in a race for the lagoon. They dashed into the water in a solid body, crowding and goring each other to get their muzzles down to the refreshing fluid, and when the horsemen came up, "Divil a bit of the water-hole, but it was only backs of cattle could be seen," as Joe observed, pulling up his horse.

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Owing to the dry weather, this favourite resort of travellers (usually a sheet of clear water, several acres in extent) had shrunk to a fetid puddle, filled with a mixture of slime and cattle-droppings, which scarcely covered the fetlocks of the mob now trampling about in it, and adding to its filthy condition.

Harold's stomach heaved at the thought of drinking this loathsome mess, thirsty as he was; and he shuddered when Joe scooped up some of it in his hand and took a mouthful, which he spat out hastily with a grimace, remarking, "It ain't first-class, I own; not so bad though as if there was a lot o' dead sheep rottin' in it. It'll be all right when it's biled."

Just then Jimmy came up to fill his cooking-pot, and observed the satisfied cattle leisurely leaving the puddle. "It warn't much account afore," he growled; "and now they beasts a' been a muckin' about in it, it's a sight wuss."

"Make your tea all the thicker," laughed the overseer. "Anyhow, you'll have to take a precious long tramp to get anything better."

Harold managed to gulp down his tea at

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supper-time somehow; but he could not tackle the lump of boiled beef which Jimmy drew out of the pot where it had been simmering for a couple of hours in some of this nasty fluid; and he mounted his horse to keep the first watch, until midnight, with the reflection that, as the others seemed to make light of it, he himself would probably soon become accustomed to these chances of Bush life.

The cattle, well blown out with grass and water, gave so little trouble that the watching was a sinecure. It was a pity that the enjoyment of so serene a night should be spoiled by the swarms of hungry mosquitoes and the stench from the long line of damp mud which marked the bed of the water-hole.

Another dawdling day's march of ten miles would bring them to Wandle Creek, on fine timbered country, well stocked with cattle, among which great care must be taken to prevent their mob from mixing. Indeed, not very long after the start, the overseer noticed tracks, and, borrowing Harold's binocular, rode on to reconnoitre. From the end of a ridge sloping

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down to a small plain he swept the country with the glass, and detected a considerable herd feeding, though at far too great a distance yet to be heard or seen by his own cattle. Making a wide detour, they avoided the risk of getting "boxed" with this herd, a misfortune which would have delayed them possibly two or three days in getting the beasts drafted out again.

If the sun had been hot hitherto, its rays were now positively scorching, veiled though they were by a thin haze. Not a breath of air stirred. Far away on the horizon rose a broad column of smoke, straight as a pillar, from a Bush-fire; and within the next hour the travellers came to a wild belt of country over which it had passed two or three days previously.

What a scene of desolation! Every blade of the dry grass burnt level with the ground; the fallen timber consumed to the smallest stick. Long lines of grey ashes, the remains of dead trees, lay on the blackened surface, and the charred trunks of the living, with their blistered leaves, betokened the severity of the fiery blast, which had left them still standing but doomed

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to perish. Tramping over this dreary waste, the cattle raised a cloud of fine black dust, which almost hid them from sight, and half suffocated the men and dogs. It was a relief to get into a succession of barren sand-hills, where the fire had met with an effectual barrier in that direction, and soon afterwards the gentle slopes of Wandle Creek, with their fine timber, came into view.

The overseer selected a bight of the creek for his camp, which was thus surrounded on three sides by the stream, the other being commanded without difficulty by a single watcher. Jimmy announced his intention of making a big damper. Harold, who was assigned the morning watch, volunteering to give him a hand, besides unpacking the horses, and doing a number of odd jobs always necessary on a journey. The dogs, and especially Don, had fared badly on salt beef, so he took the gun and sent the colley to drive some patches of fern, where he soon knocked over a half-grown doe kangaroo of about fifty pounds weight, whose "saddle" was grilling on the fire by supper-

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time, while the dogs had the remainder divided between them.

Humphreys, having the middle watch (from midnight till four in the morning, as near as could be guessed), turned in at the same time as Harold, leaving the horses ready to mount, hobbled, and tied to a tree. Harold had scarcely yet become accustomed to the habit, necessary on these expeditions, of sleeping fully dressed, boots and all; neither had he mastered the art of so managing his head as not to rick his neck when he had nothing but the ground for a pillow; for, as the cattle could not yet be trusted, it was imperative to keep the horses ready saddled. By rolling his spare Crimean shirt into a bundle, however, and lying flat on his back, he got on tolerably well, and would have slept soundly had not the mosquitoes kept up a constant assault on his hands and face. Jimmy lay as close to the fire as he could get without danger of being roasted, his head completely enveloped in his blanket—the only means, as Harold was not long in discovering, of protecting himself from the insect tormentors;

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though the effect was similar to that of a Turkish bath, with the addition of semi-suffocation. Consequently, when the overseer roused him for the morning watch, his shirt and coat were wet with perspiration. The atmosphere, too, became more and more oppressive as the night waned and morning drew on. The thin smoke went up from the watch-fires in a straight line, and the smell of the sleeping cattle was stronger than he ever remembered it, even in the stock-yard.

An hour, perhaps, of his watch had passed, when he first noticed a darkening of the southern horizon. The moon had long since set, but a planet, whose brilliancy he had been admiring from time to time through an opening between the trees, was now obscured, together with several stars in the same direction. He could just make out the Southern Cross declining to the westward, and, even as he looked, a solid cloud crept up and shut it from view. Higher and higher in the vault of the sky mounted the black line, engulfing every star to the zenith, and extending northwards until it

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wrapped the ridges of Wandle Creek in a "darkness that might be felt."

The tinkle of a bell—one of the working bullocks getting up—called Harold's attention to the cattle; and, as he turned in his saddle, a stream of vivid lightning illuminated every tree trunk with dazzling radiance, followed instantly by a crash of thunder that seemed to rip open the earth beneath him. His horse plunged so violently as almost to unseat him. In the momentary silence after the startling peal, he heard the clanging of bells and a rapid hurrying of feet, and saw dark forms passing across the light of the watch-fires. "The cattle are off!" he shouted with all his might; and, knowing that his first duty was to follow them as best he could, he grasped the reins and dashed at full gallop through the darkness in the rear of the flying mob, keeping within distance by the sound of the bells, which could be heard, sometimes near, sometimes far away, in the intervals of the peals of thunder, now deadened by a deluge of rain. Broad sheets of pale-blue lightning coming in rapid succession

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revealed the trunks of massive trees, which his horse avoided by wonderful instinct as it galloped onward through the pitchy darkness and flashes of blinding light. Many a sudden swerve of the horse, and many a slap in the face from a bunch of leaves, sent an unpleasant qualm through the rider's heart, suggesting how nearly he had been swept off by an overhanging branch or dashed against a solid tree. But these considerations must not now occupy his mind. To keep in touch with the cattle at all risks, to never lose the sound of the bells, taking his chance of dangers impossible to avoid, was enough to absorb all his attention. At one moment he would slide nearly on to the horse's neck, during an unexpected plunge down the side of a gully, and as quickly back when it mounted the opposite side. Any attempt to guide the animal, further than to keep it in the direction of the bells, would be useless. How it kept its feet over the loose stones and among the fallen timber, which he knew were strewn about these ridges, he could not imagine. On, at the same reckless pace they went, pursuer

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and pursued, mile after mile. Where was the terrified mob taking him? It could not last much longer. There were signs of slackening speed in the greater distinctness of the bells. The lightning was less frequent, the rain fell more gently, and the storm was passing away to the northward. The cattle, at length clear of the forest, began to go at an easy trot over sandy flats ploughed into furrows and seamed by the heavy torrent of the last half-hour.

Harold breathed more freely. He took the opportunity of slipping off his boots and emptying the water out of them, and made himself a degree more comfortable by wringing his billy-cock hat (one of the shoddy articles from MacNab's store), which presented a sorry appearance after the operation. A cone of faint white light showing in the eastern sky heralded the coming day, and when the sun rose no trace of the recent war of the elements dimmed its splendour. But he had not the least idea where he was. The line of march, he knew should be to the eastward; but the cattle, steadily plodding on, refused to be turned in

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that direction. Presently he heard a shout behind, and Humphreys galloped up, with Joe and the dogs close at hand.

The tremendous clap of thunder which started the cattle had, of course, roused the men, who lost no time in getting off in pursuit, taking the most likely direction, which, the overseer rightly judged, would be towards home.

"A nice old time you had, Bertram, over those ranges in the dark, I'll warrant," he remarked. "Good job you stuck to the beasts, though; else they'd ha' been all over the country at daylight. Help round 'em up, now. We'd better take 'em back to the Wandle, and camp there again to-night, and dry some of the things."

The united exertions of the men soon put the mob in the right course, and on counting them three were found missing.

"Broke their bloomin' necks down them rough gullies on the range, and sarve 'em right too," was Joe's comment.

On arriving at the camp about midday, they

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found that Jimmy had hung all the blankets up to dry, and arranged the pack-saddles round a mighty fire, while he was busy making another damper, the remains of the last having been turned into a soddened mass. Fortunately, the more perishable articles—the tea, sugar, flour, and tobacco—were protected to a great extent by the tarpaulin covering, and the fire-arms, similarly sheltered, had suffered little damage. While one man took charge of the cattle—well contented to feed quietly after their exertions—the others busied themselves in drying their saddles, which, if used in the present state of saturation, would be pretty certain to give the horses sore backs.

Late in the afternoon the overseer rode round to inspect the mob, and learned from Joe that one of them was lying down, very sick, on the bank of the creek. Humphreys went to see it, and failed to get it on its legs, even by a severe application of his stock-whip.

"It's a case, Joe; *he* won't travel any more. Go and load up the gun with ball, and bring it to me; and just move the others away a bit,

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so as they shan't be frightened; and tell Jimmy we'll have fresh beef for supper to-night."

Harold brought the gun from the camp, while Joe moved the cattle out of hearing, and a shot in the forehead settled the beast, which was evidently at the point of death.

The overseer expressed surprise at seeing so little blood flow when he cut the animal's throat in the usual way. On lifting one of the fore-legs, a punctured wound, the size of a half-crown, surrounded by clots of frothy blood, was discovered, which Bill probed to a depth of several inches with a piece of stick. "Got 'staked' last night; that's what was the matter with him, and all the blood's gone inside, I expect," he remarked.

Jimmy took the bucket and filled it with prime pieces, enough to last over the next day, not forgetting a large thin slice of the best steak, which he intended for supper the following evening. This would be spread on the horse's skin, under the saddle, where it would be protected from the flies and the heat, and the man's weight would suffice to reduce it

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to a condition of tenderness, and impart a flavour much esteemed by the experienced.

The party turned their backs reluctantly on the pleasant camp at Wandle Creek for a long day's march, over rough, scrubby country, where the cattle could hardly pick up a living from the sun-scorched grass. Fortunately there would be no lack of water during the remainder of their journey to Allora, and the overseer did not think that the rain had lasted long enough to render any of the creeks impassable.

Shortly after leaving the camp, Humphreys called to Harold to look at a tree, which stood in a somewhat isolated position at the edge of the timber. "My word, that fellow got it hot the night before last, Bertram," he remarked, pointing to a huge peppermint gum-tree.

The massive trunk—at least ten feet in diameter—had received a discharge of electricity, which had literally burst its whole fabric from the topmost branches down to the earth. A part of the trunk, forty or fifty feet long, was torn and blown outwards by the terrific disruptive force; splinters of all sizes,

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from mere sticks to great beams of wood, having been wrenched off and scattered over the ground. It was almost inconceivable that this tough timber should have been thus shattered, rent fibre from fibre, and split up into bundles of strips, often as small as pipe-stems. On one side of the tree, so completely was the wood burst, that daylight could be seen through a mass of the splinters a foot thick. Not a single leaf or twig remained. Large arms, each sufficient to make a moderate tree, had either been wrenched off, or hung suspended among the wreckage of the upper part of the trunk, which was crushed down, as though some stupendous weight had fallen upon it. For many yards round the stem the ground was littered with countless fragments, no larger than straws, and heaps of splinters of all dimensions, some of which had imbedded themselves deeply in the earth as they fell. Strangely enough, no sign of scorching or any evidence of heat could be detected on even the smallest particle of wood. The prodigious stream of electricity had rushed

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to earth through the tree, leaving it a total wreck, but affording no other evidence of its passage.

"What," thought Harold, "would have been my fate, had I been under that tree during the storm?"

Towards the end of the day, the travellers got into well-timbered low ranges, where another most extraordinary sight presented itself. For a distance of half a mile an avenue some two hundred yards broad had been cut almost straight through the forest. The prostrate trees lay piled upon each other in a general northerly direction, but in the utmost confusion. Many were snapped off far from the ground; others had been torn up by the roots; while the living trees grew up on each side of the space in two sharply defined lines. Thousands of the largest blue gums had been here hurled about like mere sticks by the force of some violent tornado, which had ploughed its way through the forest on this narrow path, sweeping down everything opposed to its fury, as though these huge trees had been so many dead reeds.

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None of the party had ever seen anything like it before, and they gazed with a sensation of mingled astonishment and awe at this evidence of the destructive power of the cyclone. Joe said, "He'd be hanged if he'd 'a believed it if anybody had swore it on his Bible oath; though he *had* heard tell of a big storm down this way three years ago." Probably that might have been the time, for the fallen timber had evidently been long dead, and a strong undergrowth of scrub and fig-vines now covered the ground, half hiding many of the prostrate whitened trunks in an embrace of soft green foliage.

The camp was made that evening close to a small creek, which came brawling down a gully from some high ranges to the northward, and spread out at intervals in shallow sandstone basins, whence it tumbled over little ledges to a lower level, until it found its way to the general river system on the plains.

Harold gave Jimmy a hand with his work, and, when all was ready for the others to come to supper in half an hour's time, he took the

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gun for a stroll along the rivulet, on the look-out for a wallaby.

"Hi, hold on, I'm a-comin' too," cried Jimmy, picking up a tinned dish. Joining Harold, he put on a mysterious air, which the former could not interpret, and walked some distance in silence. "I say," he broke out, "you're a likely chap, it strikes me, to keep your mouth shut if you hears anything in confidence like—eh?"

"Well, I dare say I could," replied Harold, somewhat amused at the little man's unusual earnestness.

"I'll tell yer why, there's *gold* in this creek. I'm dead sartin. Jist you come along o' me." And he walked to the edge of a sandy pool, put some of the dirt into the dish, and swilled it about in the stream with evidently practised hands until there were but a few grains left at the bottom of the dish. These he examined with scrupulous care, and finally cast them out, going through the same performance frequently with the same result.

Harold had begun to get rather tired of it—

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especially as Jimmy never spoke, so absorbed was he in washing down the contents of the dish to the last discernible sand grain; and was about to start off after his wallaby, when Jimmy sprang to his feet in great excitement.

"There;" he exclaimed, "I said so; that's *gold*, rough gold, too—the right sort, nuggetty, jist like what we used to git on the Lucky Valley Rush—half an ounce to the pan sometimes." And the man's wooden features were lighted up by a strange emotion as he held forth the dish, pointing to some dozen grains of sand which lay at the bottom.

Harold peeped in, but saw nothing.

"Can't yer see?" from Jimmy, with savage emphasis. "*There* it is, at the side o' them bits o' dirt," putting his finger close to a minute reddish-yellow speck, smaller, Harold thought, than any pin's head he had ever seen.

Jimmy produced a little bottle from his trousers pocket and most dexterously transferred the speck to it. Then, holding the vial up to the light, and clûtching his companion by the arm—"See them others?" (a dozen or so of

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similar specks). "I got 'em all out of Myall Creek. There's gold *all over Wallaroo;* but the boss don't know it, nor none of 'em neither, except me. You'll keep it dark, now? And we'll go down to Brisbane and get claims, and peg 'em out and make our pile before anybody has a look-in. Give us your fist."

Harold accepted the outstretched hand, in doubt whether it was that of a monomaniac or a discoverer of untold wealth; and they walked back to the camp without another word, and, so far as he himself was concerned, without another thought on the subject until the next day, when, happening to pass through a gully in which a number of pits had been dug, he asked the overseer what the holes were made for.

"Oh," he replied, with a laugh, "they're prospectin' holes. Some chaps came up this way two or three years ago, and scraped about in every creek and gully for gold; but they didn't do any good. Didn't earn their grub, I heard. Of course there's gold all about the Maranoa, and right away to the Warrego. If you take a

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dish and wash the dirt you'll get the colour anywhere. It comes out of the quartz higher up in the ranges, but not enough of it to pay. There's many a fortune to be made some day though, I expect, in the rocky gullies at the head of Myall Creek, when they get crushing machinery up there and go right down into the reefs."

For the next few days everything went on quietly with the cattle, which had become accustomed to travelling, and the men were enabled to secure a fair proportion of rest at night, with their boots off and their saddles under their heads, when not on watching duty. Harold, however, found it a very doubtful advantage to take off any clothing. Usually, after the first hours' heavy sleep, he awoke in a state of feverish heat, the blanket almost thrown off, and his feet and legs covered with mosquitoes, which had made such good use of their opportunity, that he tossed about during the remainder of the night tearing at the thousand and one irritating spots where his skin had been punctured by the bloodthirsty

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insects. Still, in spite of the scorching heat by day, the plague of mosquitoes by night, the coarse and not too cleanly food, and the monotonous work of dawdling along at the tails of the cattle, there was an indefinable charm in this free, nomadic life, which he would not have exchanged for all the pleasures of civilization.

One evening, when more than half their journey was over, Jimmy was noticed at supper-time, paying unusual attention to the iron bucket, which was simmering at the edge of a large fire, with a sheet of bark on it as a substitute for a lid.

"Eh, Jimmy, what's up?" asked Joe, as the cook, assuming an air of importance, proceeded to withdraw from the bucket a globular object, about the size of a man's head, tied up in the tail of an old striped cotton shirt.

Jimmy placed the object on a sheet of bark, cut the string of the cloth, and displayed its steaming contents.

"There you are—plum-pudden," he exclaimed, with a self-satisfied grin. "Why,

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yer bloomin' duffers, didn't yer know it was Christmas Day?"

Not one of the party, except the cook, had recollected that this was the veritable 25th of December; the festival of Old England's time-honoured roast beef and plum-pudding; but as soon as the fact was realized, they gave three hearty cheers for the cook, and three more for the occasion, with one extra for the "pudden."

"This is how it is," Jimmy explained. "When the storekeeper" (Charlie Keene's designation among the men) "was a weighin' out the stuff, I gives him the tip as how we should have Christmas Day on the journey, and he sneaks in a pound o' plums unbeknown to the boss" (here the little man chuckled at the pious fraud) "to put in the pudden. *Now*, all we wants is a bottle o' Hollands to wash it down, and that's what we ain't got—worse luck!" he concluded, with a rueful glance at his pannikin of tea.

"Never mind, Jimmy," said the overseer consolingly; "the plum-duff's first-class, and

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you shall have a good skinful of liquor at my expense when we get to the township—I promise you that, my pippin."

They sat round the camp fire an hour later than usual, talking about Christmas in the Old Country, recollections of which were dim for all except Harold, who, in response to urgent demands, gave the party a recitation, and sang two or three songs with a chorus, which no doubt startled the opossums in the neighbouring gum-trees.

A week more of steady plodding, and the mob was safely lodged in the butcher's paddock, somewhat lower in condition than when they left Wallaroo; but "a fine, strong lot, and a goodish lump of beef on them still," as the buyer remarked with much satisfaction.

The overseer remained a day to transact some business for the station, and directed the men to take the pack-horses and working-bullocks home by the regular dray-track, after they had indulged in the inevitable "spree," which meant thirty-six hours' hard drinking—Humphreys having kept his promise to Jimmy perhaps

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rather too liberally. In this short time Harold had seen quite enough of the slovenly "township," with its stores and grog-shops, its teams of sleepy bullocks, standing fetlock deep in dust in "streets" not yet cleared of the stumps of trees, while their drivers were loading up the drays with flour, sugar, and miscellaneous articles for the surrounding stations; when Humphreys asked—

"Which will you do, Bertram—crawl along with Joe and Jimmy, or come with me? I'm going to make a straight track for Wallaroo. We shall have to chance it for our grub mostly to what we can pick up at the shepherds' huts, and go without, if we don't happen to be in luck. What do you say? We shall do it under the week, I expect."

Harold assented without hesitation, and the two men were soon jogging out of the township on the best of the spare horses—selected by the overseer, after a careful examination to ascertain their freedom from serious girth-galls or sore backs—with a few days' supply of tea and sugar, and a hunk of beef and damper for

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the morrow's support wrapped in their blankets. Don, careering gaily ahead of them, and returning periodically to bark under the horses' noses, seemed to feel that he was homeward bound.

The overseer, determined to get over the ground as fast as possible, covered forty miles before he pulled up at a little creek, unsaddled and hobbled out the horses and washed their backs, while Harold made preparations for supper. The two men rolled themselves up in their blankets after their frugal meal, which, scanty as it was, Harold shared with his dog, and got on their way again soon after sunrise.

Humphreys intended to make for an outlying shepherd's hut, which he had once visited in this neighbourhood, but he somehow missed it. Towards evening, then, the travellers found themselves obliged to camp out, with no prospect of anything to eat. The overseer therefore suggested beating some patches of scrub on the chance of Harold knocking down a wallaby with his revolver. They separated a little distance, and drove some likely ground, where

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several of the animals were started, but none offered even a snap shot in the thick cover.

When Harold was thinking of giving it as up a bad job, especially as the light was becoming every moment less, Humphreys shouted lustily from a distance. Harold stood still, and soon heard the familiar thud, thud, rapidly approaching. Presently three dusky forms came leaping over a fairly clear space not thirty paces from him. Unfortunately for itself, one paused an instant to listen, giving just a chance for a quick shot, the effect of which Harold could not at first see, but, on running forward after the dog, he was not a little pleased to find Don fast hold of a small kangaroo, which, in spite of a smashed hind leg, was making desperate efforts to get away. Picking up a piece of dead wood, he rendered the animal insensible by a heavy blow on the nose, and finished the business with his knife.

"My word, we *are* in luck!" exclaimed the overseer gleefully, coming up. "Here's snpper, and breakfast too, for all hands."

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In a very few moments he had taken the skin off the loins, and wrapped six or seven pounds of the best of the meat in it, which proved excellent when roasted on the bright embers, with some to spare for the next day.

Although the horses began to show signs of distress, Humphreys grudged them the usual hour's "spell" at noon, so anxious was he to get this forced journey over. All the afternoon, heavy banks of clouds, piled up on the horizon, threatened an approaching storm, and the close heat proved most trying to the riders as well as their nags. Just before sunset, they arrived at the head of a deep gully, where a small pool of the brightest water, caught in a rocky basin, tempted them to unsaddle and camp.

Cooking the remains of the kangaroo (none too fresh after being wrapped in a blanket all this sultry day), they made the best of it they could, with a billy of invigorating tea to counteract the decided flavour; and, shadowed by a host of splendid gum-trees, with their saddles for pillows resting against one of the giant trunks, soon forgot all discomforts in

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sound sleep; Don, according to his custom, curling himself up close to his master's head.

In the middle of the night came one of those surprises which the Bushman in time learns to take as a matter of course. The sleepers were awakened by a deluge of rain, a blaze of lightning, and the roar of heaven's artillery around them, in a succession of flashes and reports without a moment's interval.

"Lively night this," shouted Humphreys in Harold's ear. "How're you getting on, mate? Hold on to your blanket, or it'll be washed away."

So Harold concluded, as the water rushed round the tree and swept past his head to the level of his ears filling his boots up and running out at the top.

For about an hour the men lay watching the magnificent display, but unable to exchange a word, except at the top of their voices. Harold, too much occupied and excited during the night stampede of the cattle to pay much attention to the storm, now viewed the whole of this grand scene—a tropical thunderstorm—at his

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leisure, his face turned upwards to the sky, which opened at frequent intervals, in mile-long rents, and poured forth streams of fire like massive, vibrating columns, single, double, and treble, linking heaven and earth together for periods of several seconds. No description could ever have conveyed to his mind the awful grandeur of these gashes of blinding light, cleaving the darkness on every side, leaping upwards from the ground and back again, twisting themselves in rapid serpentine convolutions all over the surface for miles, and often ending in a gigantic star-like head, with a thousand bristling points.

It happened that they had camped on one of a series of rocky ridges containing masses of iron ore, but sufficiently fertile to give a somewhat shallow roothold to the forest trees. On these ridges the whole force of the electrical storm expended itself, ceasing almost as instantaneously as it had begun. Then, for some minutes, the air became dead calm; and each individual splash could be heard as it fell from the leaves overhead.

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"What's that? Listen!" exclaimed the overseer presently.

A hollow murmur, like the far-off beating of an angry sea on a pebbly beach, growing nearer and nearer, until, before they had time to think what it was, a furious tornado of wind broke through the forest, tearing off huge limbs, and blowing the stones about as though they were dry leaves. Crash, crash, went one of the forest giants to the earth not far from them; then another and another, four, five, six, followed by many more in the distance, smashing in their fall the arms of others which still withstood the force of the blast, and crushing down a host of smaller growth. Harold's heart jumped as the tree under which they lay swayed and shivered to its base, and the earth heaved round them from the strain on the roots. To the bravest man it would have been a moment of terror. The whole forest seemed about to be swept away. Awestricken by the tumult of devastation, the men spoke not a word, for the blast of a trumpet would have been but a feeble whisper to the roar of the hurricane.

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A few short minutes, and all was over. The destroyer passed on, leaving the wreck behind, and an atmosphere of perfect serenity.

"Not blown away, are you, Bertram?" asked Humphreys. "Blazes—that wind *was* a caution, though! I wonder where the horses got to, out of it! If they're killed, we shall be in a proper fix."

Both the men felt chilly after having been so thoroughly drenched. They set to work to wring out their blankets, and squeeze the water from the padding of their saddles; next stripping off all their clothing, and wringing the articles as dry as was possible in the circumstances, the overseer philosophically observing, "Well, this isn't all sugar, I will allow; but only to think of the thousands of poor beggars that live in houses, sweltering in their beds a night like this, without a breath of fresh air. I do pity 'em! And such a wash-down as we've had, too—with the water going in at our necks and out at our boots—lovely!"

"That's one way of looking at it," laughed Harold, much amused at his companion's imper-

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turbability; "but I could do with a little less of this grit and mud soaked into my shirt."

As soon as it was light enough to distinguish objects, Humphreys set about getting a fire; and it rather puzzled Harold how this was to be done. Finding a partly rotten log near at hand, Bill dug into it with his knife, carefully brushing aside the wet external wood, and collecting the inner in a small heap at the bottom of the hole.

"Oh, that's the dodge," said Harold, looking on; "I know all mine are wet," as Bill produced from his belt-pouch a small, strong, tightly corked bottle full of wax-matches, struck one cautiously on the file-roughened back of his knife, and applied it to the wood. This he skilfully coaxed into a flame, which rapidly became strong enough to bear some small dead sticks. When the fire was well started, he took the bridles and went in search of the horses, leaving Harold to attend to making the tea, which was to serve them for breakfast.

"Don, old man," he said to the unhappy-

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looking colley, who sat gazing dolefully into the fire, "hard times for you, my boy; little enough to eat yesterday, and none to-day. *You'll* be glad enough to get back to the flesh-pots of Wallaroo, I'll be bound."

The sun was well above the horizon before the overseer returned with the horses, which he had found a mile away at the bottom of a deep gully.

"Snug as could be, out of the worst of it. I expect they knew it was coming, the wily beggars. Precious little in their bellies, though, I can see; and these wet saddles will play the mischief with their backs."

Having swallowed their tea, the men lost no time in getting away on their journey, the overseer leading off in a more northerly direction than he had hitherto kept, in order to cross the heads of the creeks that flowed to the Maranoa, and avoid the flooded streams on the lower ground. All along the timbered ridges were strewn the wrecks of the previous night's hurricane—prostrate trees, with their roots snapped or torn from the ground, and branches and

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bark scattered far and wide over the surface. Here a tree had fallen across a gully, forming a bridge that might last half a century; there another had been caught as it fell, its topmost limbs interlaced with those of a near neighbour, which seemed to groan under the burden. Harold counted them by hundreds during the first hour's ride, and now understood how it was that so much dead timber always encumbered the ground in these Australian gum-forests.

When crossing a broad cattle-track, later in the morning, Don exhibited signs of excitement, to which Harold called his companion's attention.

"What's the dog after, Humphreys?"

"Something's up, for certain," replied Bill musingly, "or he wouldn't be nosing about and whining that way and looking so knowing at us." Jumping from his horse, and flinging the bridle to Harold, he stooped down and examined the soft damp track; then, walking a few paces, "Sheep, by jingo! and not far off, either. The dog smells 'em. Come on," he cried. For

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half an hour he patiently traced the footmarks and other indications of the passage of a flock, picking out the trail by minute inspection where it led over hard ground, noting how the tufts of grass had been nibbled and the direction in which the dead stems were bent.

"There they are," at length called out Harold, who had been scanning the country round meanwhile, "down in that level bit at the foot of the next gully."

A very few moments more, and the travellers were exchanging a hearty "good day" with the shepherd, to whom Humphreys explained matters, winding up with the question, "Got any grub, mate? We're bloomin' sharp set."

"Out in that boomer last night, was yer? Then you had a jolly rough time, I'll take my davey. Grub? Yes; and welcome. My hut's about a couple o' miles away, at the head o' this 'ere gully. Keep the sun on your left while you cross the next two ridges, then bear a trifle to the right—there's a little brigalow scrub you must go through—turn along the side of the next ridge (don't cross it, or you'll miss the

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place), then you'll strike this 'ere gully agin, and right afore you you'll see the yard. That's the shortest way; but if you foller the gully right away from this, it turns an' twists about so you'll not be there till sundown. That is, if you're in any hurry, you'd better take the short cut. And you'll find a good lump o' beef on the hook up the chimley, and 'arf a damper on the shelf. Help yourselves. The ration-carrier will be round to-morrow. And, oh, I forgot—the key of the door's under the foot o' the slab next the corner post o' the hut, right hand side. Mind you put it back agin."

"All right," replied the overseer. "If ever you come Wallaroo way, ask for Bill Humphreys, and you shan't want for a blow-out, or a job either—take my word;" and with a hearty "good-bye" and "good luck to you," the travellers jogged on their way to the hut, which was found without difficulty, in spite of the owner's rather vague directions.

Taking a modest portion of the provisions, and carefully fastening the door, they continued their journey in a north-easterly direction

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until the evening, when a track which they followed for some distance led them to a clearing, with a rough bark shed—a particularly welcome sight, as rain was beginning to fall steadily.

Hitching up the horses, and leaving Harold to unsaddle and turn them out, Bill entered to make a fire, and immediately startled his companion by a loud exclamation, succeeded by a burst of strong language.

"Here, look here!" calling to Harold. "See that?" (pointing to a dark mass, scarcely distinguishable in the dusk). "And I sprawled right over the blasted thing!"

In the middle of the hut lay a dead horse, which had either been stabled there and left to die, or wandered in of its own accord, and had advanced considerably towards decomposition.

A council was held on the situation, summed up by Bill with, "Here's a go. It's either another night out in the wet, or inside along with that nosegay. *I* shall try it, anyhow."

So it was agreed. Just room could be made

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between the carcase and the fireplace for the men to lie down, and the overseer managed, by cutting off the inner surface of the bark, to get enough material to boil the tea.

Harold, for his part, was scarcely able to swallow the mouthful of beef and damper hoarded from the small toll taken of the friendly shepherd's store; and, throughout a sleepless night, he frequently debated with himself the comparative disadvantages of walking about in the rain or continuing to inhale the streaks of putrescent odour wafted from the dead horse.

A splendid morning, with a refreshing easterly breeze, drove unpleasant recollections from their minds. The overseer looked forward cheerfully to a chance of supper, at all events, with the stockmen on "old Smith's" cattle run, adjoining Wallaroo, being quite familiar with the locality of certain mustering-yards, which he hoped to reach by nightfall, if they could knock thirty miles out of their starved and jaded beasts, now much distressed by saddle-sores and girth-galls, the result of hard work and wet and sultry weather.

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Harold had nursed his revolver with the utmost care, trying every expedient to keep it dry during the late persistent rains, but without effect. A noble kangaroo, attended by two does, sat quietly looking at the horsemen while he snapped the hammer on the remaining cartridges to no purpose.

At noon, Humphreys consulted Harold's compass, and laid out course to the south of west, in order to strike the cattle-yards. This brought them into the lower country among the creeks, in many of which the water rose to their saddle-girths, while the horses floundered heavily in the boggy soil. Although Bill knew the country well, and could choose the best ground, the going was so bad that the sun had long set before they arrived at the yards. On dismounting they found, much to their disappointment, the hut deserted. "Not even a dead horse to say 'good evening' to," as Bill grimly remarked while lighting a match and surveying the interior. "Wonder whether they've left any grub?" On that important point he proceeded to satisfy himself as soon as he had started a

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fire; fossicking round in every place where anything was likely to be hidden away.

When Harold came in with the saddles and bridles, Bill was peering into a small paper twizzle by the flickering light of the fire, the result of his scrutiny being a joyful ejaculation. "Flour *it is;* rather musty, though. Something else, too," taking the lid off a flat china pot ornamented with gilding; "smells"—sniff, sniff—"funny, but nice; looks like mutton fat. I say, Bertram, what's this in this swell pot? It won't do to eat it till we're sure about it."

Harold stooped down to the fire and examined the pot, breaking out into a hearty laugh as he deciphered and read aloud the label on the dirty lid, "F. S. Cleaver's Genuine Bear's Grease for the Hair."

"Eat this, Bill? Why, it's pomatum; and it stinks of patchouli."

"Can't eat it? I'm going to have a jolly good try to knock up a johnny-cake with it and the flour anyhow, and chance it—if you'll guarantee it isn't poison."

"I don't suppose it will kill you straight off;

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but I wouldn't guarantee it won't make you sick."

Humphreys turned up his saddle, and kneaded the flour, about half a pound, and the bear's grease together on the seat into a stiff dough, flattened it out in the form of a thin cake, and laid it carefully on the hot embers. The hut began to smell like a perfumer's shop.

Bill watched the cake browning with a smile of satisfaction, and, when it was done to his fancy, turned gravely to Harold—"Come along, now, mate; supper's ready."

But Harold would have none of it.

"You won't? Very well—all the more for me." And Bill munched the cake with much gusto, giving his companion meanwhile a homily in a tone of mock gravity. "Bertram, I don't like to see a young man despise the good things of this mortal life. My maxim is, 'Eat, and be thankful, whenever you can get it.' You never know whether you'll have another feed; and on this occasion I'm bound to say I am sharp set. Here's nearly half gone, now, one more chance for you—going, going—ah, I thought you

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couldn't stand it," as Harold, seeing how well the other was getting on, felt the full force of a hungry man's craving.

Humphreys handed him the remainder; and, by the time he had put the last crumb into his mouth, he was a convert to Bill's "eat and be thankful" maxim, although from that time forth, throughout his life, he could never dissociate johnny-cakes from the scent of patchouli.

The overseer dried some of his tobacco by the fire, lighted his pipe, and talked of the morrow's journey—fifteen miles—to Wallaroo. They would be obliged to swim the Maranoa, that was certain; and it would be in strong flood.

"I've heard a good deal said about different ways of swimming a horse—which do you think is the best?" asked Harold.

"It all depends on what sort of horse it is. Now, Boxer's that plucky, he don't mind where he goes, or what he carries, as long as the man don't climb up his neck. On the Bogan, once, I remember putting up at a sheep station, and I hobbled him out as usual. Next morning, I

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tracked him to the bank of the river, and it was coming down pretty strong. There was Mr. Boxer, enjoying himself to rights in the cultivation paddock on the other side, among the green corn. We couldn't cross for two days, till the water went down at the ford. Boxer had blowed himself out like a balloon, *and he still had his hobbles on.* He'd managed somehow to swim across and get up the steep bank on the other side. He never seems to care how fast the stream runs, and if there's any timber coming down it don't bother him a bit.

"Mind you—what with the stream boring against his side, the heavy swag on the saddle, and the man in a funk very likely rolling about on his back, the horse has all his work cut out to keep himself right side up. There's three ways you can swim him. Take off your boots, make 'em fast to the 'dees' on the pommel; sit very tight, draw up your feet behind out of the stirrups, so that you won't get entangled; catch hold of his mane, and don't lean forward and put his head under

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water. If you do, over he rolls for certain. It's best to leave the bridle quite slack, and let him stretch his neck out. A fool of a chap I saw once pull the near rein, up stream, and the horse could only keep his balance by turning his head down. Luckily, he touched bottom soon, or else it would have been all a go with them among a lot of driftwood blocked against the bank just below. It's easy for a good swimmer, like you, to stick to the saddle. You have plenty of confidence, and the horse feels it—but there's always a risk in it. You can't stop him going down stream.

"Another way—you can slip off over his rump just as he begins to lose his legs, catch hold of his tail, and he'll pull you along—easier for him than any other plan—and the moment he touches ground again you pull yourself on to his back."

"But," interposed Harold, "how do you keep clear of his hind-legs?"

"Well, you do, somehow. Only you mustn't get too close. This is the way I like best. Keep your seat till he's off his legs; then slip

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off—down stream side—with a firm grip of his mane, and you'll be carried alongside him, and be ready for getting on his back again as soon as he touches the bottom. Besides, if he turns his head down the river, you can splash his face on that side with your other hand—the only chance to keep him straight. Anyhow, crossing a flooded river on a horse is one of the nastiest jobs I know of, if you keep ever so cool, specially for a chap like me that can't swim."

When saddling-up in the morning, they felt that, though they could have tackled another perfumed johnny-cake, had it been forthcoming, it was a consolation to reflect that the land of plenty was not far off. The horses, too, plucked up more spirit and pointed their ears in the direction of "home."

The Maranoa presented a grand sight, sweeping through the plain a smooth sheet a quarter of a mile wide. To Harold's remark that he had no idea where the crossing could be, the overseer replied curtly, taking off his boots and fixing them to the saddle, "But I know. You see that big tree on the other bank? Are you

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ready?" ("Yes," from Harold.) "Go ahead, then, and don't forget what I told you."

They splashed through shallow water for some distance, and suddenly found themselves up to their shoulders, Harold still in the saddle, and Humphreys clinging to the mane of his horse. Swayed in his seat by the unexpected force of the current, and fearing for the struggling horse, Harold also grasped its mane and slid into the water by its side. The animal, relieved from the weight, now went steadily forward. Some anxious moments, while a dead tree coming down stream almost caught them, and the worst was over. Out of the swift mid-current into the smoother water, after this danger, the horses slowly fought their way to the opposite side, dragging themselves up the bank in so exhausted a condition that the utmost efforts of the men hardly prevented them from falling back into the river, and another half-hour's floundering over the sodden ground brought them to the station dead knocked up.

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CHAPTER II.

The Brush Turkey's Mound-nest—Kangaroo Hunting—The "Flyer"—The Big Doe takes Refuge in the Water—A Stand-up Fight with an "Old Man" Kangaroo—A Crippled Hound—The Overseer makes a Raid on the "Scrubbers"—Wild Cattle Shooting—A Bull-fight by Moonlight—Joe's Horse gets Horned—A Desperate Encounter with a Bull, and a "near thing" for Harold.

HAROLD experienced considerable difficulty next day in taking to pieces and cleaning and oiling his revolver. For another such journey as the last he devised a waterproof bag in which to carry the weapon. Procuring a fresh bullock's bladder, he "suppled" it well with mutton fat, inserted a cork into the neck and whipped some string round the outside of the neck, which pinched the membrane tightly to the cork and held the latter it its place. Six hours' immersion of this primitive bag in water proved it to

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be impervious to damp, and it would accommodate both the revolver and two dozen cartridges. He now felt quite secure against the soaking night dews, the drenching rains which they had encountered on their recent journey, and even a swim across a flooded river.

While Humphreys went round the sheep stations, Harold took Pompey with him to spend a day or two at the lagoons and search for a brush turkey's nest, of which he had been told there were several in the scrubs. Arrived at the old camp, they unsaddled and made preparations for passing the night, in order to hunt the turkeys in the cool of the morning. Meanwhile, Harold set about testing the reports of the extraordinary depth of these lagoons, for which purpose he had brought with him a reel of Taylor's crochet cotton, marked "300 yards," filched from the store for him by Keene, and a bullet with which to sink the line. As soon as Pompey saw him undressed and comprehended his intention, the old fellow went into a state of excitement and warned him against the "bunyeep" which lived in the

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lagoon, and would be sure to "eat him up white fellow." Harold, however, knowing that there were no crocodiles south of the Fitzroy river, laughed at the warning, plunged into the lagoon, and swam to the middle with his reel of cotton and bullet. Treading water, he fastened the bullet to the cotton and slowly unwound the reel. The bullet went down further and further with no sign of bottom. At length, when the line was almost all spent, he felt the lead bump, and, biting off the cotton, swam ashore and unwound the remainder from the reel, which he judged to be about ten yards. The rumours, then, were correct. These lagoons in the alluvial soil proved to be at least eight hundred feet deep—a fact for which he vainly endeavoured to account, unless they might possibly be old earthquake fissures, now filled with water from the overflow of the Maranoa.

A resplendent morning dawned upon the lagoons. The jackasses saluted the intruders on their domain with a chorus of cynical laughter, flitting from branch to branch and

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watching curiously while Pompey boiled the tea for breakfast. Harold went down to the nearest lagoon with Don, and had a long swim in the limpid water, telling Pompey that he was going to kill the "bunyeep." Over the surface were distributed hundreds of ducks with their broods, the ducklings rushing hither and thither in eager chase of flies, and leaving behind them lines of silvery ripples. They did not recognize in Harold's head the presence of their arch-enemy, man, and he was enabled to swim into the midst of this nursery of wild fowl without disturbing it, though the rapid evolutions of the mothers, turning as if on a fixed pivot, implied some suspicion of the round object bobbing on the water. From behind a clump of the pink water-lilies sallied a pair of black swans, accompanied by their six sooty cygnets, the male bird uttering his penny-trumpet note as he led the way.

The beauty and serenity of the scene tempted Harold to swim on and enjoy it, until Pompey must have given him up for lost.

Breakfast over, they entered the dense scrub,

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Harold following the lead of his guide, and Don keeping close to heel.

On the soft vegetable soil no footfall could be heard as the men crept cautiously along beneath the canopy of foliage, through which no ray of sunshine ever penetrated to the ground. Here and there amidst the close undergrowth—at times so tangled that they were obliged to crawl through it on hands and knees—rose the stem of a great gum-tree, embraced by the arms of the parasitic fig, which threw out buttresses ten feet deep at the level of the earth all round the stem, and climbing to the highest branches, spread itself out in riotous luxuriance to the full blaze of the sun. Not a sound broke the stillness of this dark jungle, but the occasional patter of a fig dropped by the fruit-eating pigeons, from a height of three hundred feet, or perhaps the soft call of a wonga-wonga pigeon. Wallabies flitted noiselessly before the hunters, sitting up now and then to listen and look back upon the creeping forms of the men and the dog.

Harold noticed with admiration the lithe

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movements of the old savage, twisting his naked body through the undergrowth, scarcely brushing the foliage, and never cracking a dead twig under his stealthy tread, while keeping his sharp eyes on every opening in the cover to detect the game they were seeking.

Well accustomed as Harold had now become to the Queensland summer, he felt the heat of this scrub most oppressive. The perspiration ran down his forehead into his eyes and dripped upon the barrel of his gun. The mosquitoes, enjoying themselves in this vapour bath from the damp earth, and a temperature of above 100°, assaulted his face and hands in swarms, and pierced his skin through his shirt wherever it clung to his body. But these discomforts were forgotten instantly when Pompey stopped suddenly in a crouching position, and held his hand behind his back, with the fingers spread, as a sign to halt. Harold looked eagerly in the direction of the black fellow's gaze, and observed that the ground seemed to rise abruptly in front of them. At the side of this elevation a fine male turkey was walking

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about, gathering small rotten sticks and decayed vegetation with one foot, and jerking the materials backwards upon the heap, being so busily employed that he did not suspect the presence of two pairs of human eyes fixed upon him from a distance of between thirty and forty yards. This was a familiar enough sight to Pompey; but as it was the first time Harold had seen a brush turkey engaged in nest-building, he disregarded the impatient signals of his companion to fire. He would rather have lost his chance of securing the bird than miss any of its singular actions. For some minutes, then, he stood motionless, watching the bird walking round the heap, methodically piling up the fresh material grasped by his foot, and thrown behind him towards the centre with surprising force and regularity; and it was not until the turkey began to move to a position where it would not be easily seen that he raised his gun, and in doing so made some slight noise. The turkey raised himself to full height, but before he could open his wings a wire cartridge laid him out dead on the spot. The

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mound, about four feet high and twelve feet diameter at its base, and of conical form, was composed entirely of leaf-mould and small twigs, the collection probably of several seasons.

Pompey, armed with a pointed stick, set to work to turn over the surface with care, exploring the mound in a circle near the top, and soon unearthed an egg larger than that of a goose, and, after examining it carefully, handed it to Harold with a grunt of satisfaction, pronouncing it "budgeree." In the course of a few minutes, several more were brought to light, having been always placed, it seemed, upright in the heap, the small end downwards, about a foot below the surface. Harold laid down his gun, and groped about in the loose soil, which at some little depth he found to be quite warm with the fermentation of the vegetable matter. While thus engaged he felt something move, which made him withdraw his hand in alarm. The earth heaved, there was a momentary struggle, and a half-feathered chick burst from its prison and scampered off with the utmost alacrity. Don caught sight of it and secured

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it. While Harold was tying its legs together, the young bird made desperate efforts to escape, exhibiting astonishing strength and determination. Here was the most mysterious bird's-nest he had ever found, containing both fresh laid eggs, others in a state advanced far towards hatching, besides a young chick with the flight feathers well developed! Further explorations revealed more eggs in different stages, and another chick, evidently just emerged from the broken shell around it, but nevertheless, strongly feathered and capable of making a vigorous struggle to release itself from the captor's hands. The nest had no doubt been used in common by several females laying at different times, and the mound consequently produced eggs in various conditions, ranging from those just deposited, to others "hard set" by the warmth of fermentation in this remarkable natural incubator.

Taking six of the eggs, which Pompey indicated as fresh by his emphatic "budgeree," Harold carefully placed them in the baggy front of his shirt, where the belt prevented them from

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slipping down, and hurried off to the camp, well satisfied with the morning's find. Sitting in the shade of the trunk of a large tree, he employed the afternoon in skinning the turkeys and blowing one of the eggs, hoping to find an opportunity one day of sending his trophies to England. Pompey, meanwhile, made up a big fire over a hole grubbed in the earth, and, when it had burned down to a mass of red-hot embers, these were scraped away from the hole, the two turkeys laid in it, the embers replaced over them, and the black fellow, who was evidently a *chef de cuisine* in such matters, superintended the baking of the birds for supper.

Although Harold knew next to nothing of the language of his companion, and Pompey but a few words of English, the latter was quick to divine the white man's thoughts and wishes. Accordingly, when Harold pointed to the turkey's eggs, Pompey handed him one of the finest, which he thought might be "poached" in the quart billy. Half-filling the billy with water, which was soon brought to a boil, he broke the clean egg, with its rich

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dark yolk, into it, and set the vessel, now full to the brim, among some hot embers. When it was done, he poured off the water, and found the mass of egg—nearly as large as his fist—enough for a substantial and delicious meal; though the turkey was so tempting that he managed to make room for a leg and half the breast. Pompey exhibited his gluttonous capacity by disposing of the best of the remainder of the birds and an egg, which he roasted in the embers, and seemed to enjoy all the more that it contained a chick within a few days of hatching.

Some days afterwards, Joe and Jimmy having returned from the township, Humphreys proposed a kangaroo hunt across the grass-tree flats, which stretched away for miles along the south bank of Myall Creek; and Harold, who was now more expert at negotiating rough country on horseback, saddled up Boxer and rode out with the overseer to the stockmen's huts, where Joe was waiting with his two dogs, "Jack" and "Jill"—powerful wire-haired animals, showing signs of mixed greyhound

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and Scotch deerhound blood, bearing many a scar inflicted by the claws of some "old man" kangaroo, and well up to their business. Joe buckled the tin water-bottle to his belt, and trotted off across the creek, followed closely by the dogs, with Harold and Bill in the rear.

They were not long about a "find." Three does reared their heads from a patch of ferns, and were instantly sighted by the dogs, who went at them with such a dash that one would have thought the game must be killed before it moved. But the kangaroos, taking the alarm in time, bounded off in different directions, throwing the dogs out for a moment while they made their choice of one, and settled down to the pursuit. For the first two or three hundred yards it looked as though the quarry would have gone right away from the dogs, so rapidly did the "flyer" gain distance; while the dogs were at the top of their speed, and on ground favourable to themselves. Even Boxer, the fastest horse on the run, could not keep on fair terms with the hunt, and the others were left far behind ere the first mile

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had been covered. Now the dogs began to gain on the fugitive. A splendid "double" on the part of the kangaroo, almost at right angles to its course, gave it a short respite, then some more dodging, varied by vigorous but ineffectual spurts, and Harold, galloping down a smooth slope, could just see the kangaroo roll over, with the dogs on it, in the distance.

The pace had been most severe — more so than the fastest burst Harold had ever ridden in the Old Country with foxhounds —at top speed from start to finish, and the game was run into within a couple of miles from where it was found. He cut off the tail and strapped it firmly to his saddle-bow, and all the riders loosened their girths to allow the horses to get their wind. Even Joe pronounced the run a "clinker," and expressed his conviction that the kangaroo would have gone clean away from his dogs on rough ground, or among timber. Half an hour's rest, and girths were tightened for another spin. Joe soon afterwards sighted a small mob going pretty fast

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from the creek towards a ridge, and halloed the dogs on, while the men all galloped forward to cut the kangaroos off from the broken ground for which they were making. Three succeeded in getting through to the ridge, and two were turned back over almost the same ground as that on which the last hunt had taken place. Again the dogs picked out their game, a full-grown grey doe, who, as soon as she found herself pressed, put her hands into her pouch, and threw from it a large young one, which went off in another direction, followed by Jill, who had noticed the movement. Jack, however, an older stager, up to this trick, stuck to the mother, and began to close with her before half a mile had been run, the horsemen being now well up with the chase.

"She's off for the water," shouted Joe, as the kangaroo swung round and headed for the creek, which widened out here into a pool of some size. Before the dog could recover his ground after the sudden turn and come fairly up with her again, the kangaroo had plunged into the creek, where she stood firmly planted up to her

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armpits, facing the enemy. Jack dashed in, but, just as he reached her, the water carried him off his feet, and the kangaroo, catching him with her arms, beat him down and endeavoured to tread him under her strong legs, when the dog must have been drowned or crippled, had not Joe rushed in to the rescue, and struck the beast a heavy blow on the head with the stirrup-iron, which he had pulled from the saddle as he threw himself from his horse.

"Take that, you cussed brute," he growled, with another savage blow at the sinking kangaroo, "Kill my Jack, would yer? I'll talk to yer about that."

The dog, none the worse for his ducking, refreshed himself by a swim round, lapping the water meanwhile, and, the tail of the kangaroo being fixed on Joe's saddle, half an hour's halt was called to wash out the horse's mouths and ease their girths. During the rest, Jill came crouching to her master's side with the air of a naughty child seeking forgiveness for some petty fault, but conscious of having had a tit-bit out of that young kangaroo which its

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mother threw from her pouch when fleeing for her own life.

Both the horses and dogs were now showing signs of so much distress from the fierce heat of the mid-January sun, that it was decided to jog easily homewards without another hunt. But, like many a more serious resolution, this was frustrated by circumstances. Crossing the ridges between the creek and Joe's hut, the party found themselves in the midst of about a score of kangaroos, which had been hidden by the ferns and rough grass. Heads popped up in all directions, and their owners realizing the danger, scattered to the right and left in the utmost confusion and surprise. It was impossible to restrain the dogs. Jack picked out a monster, and Harold followed; while the other men kept on the track of one which Jill had selected. The heavy ferns, with the dead timber lying about, made the running very bad for the dog, and the kangaroo, seeming to be quite aware of this, did not hurry himself. He crashed unharmed through the branches of fallen trees which would have crippled the

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dog, and bounded from side to side with consummate skill to avoid obstacles in his path, or sprang lightly over fallen trunks that taxed all Boxer's mettle to clear. Going down the side of a ridge the kangaroo took prodigious leaps, and visibly gained on his pursuers. Some rather clearer ground now gave the dog a temporary advantage, and the kangaroo knew it. His sudden turns betrayed his anxiety, and consciousness of failing strength. Still the great red-brown body—alternately round as a ball when doubled up for the leap, and again straight as a line when fully extended, pounded on before the dog, taking cunning advantage of everything through which his own weight easily carried him while presenting a momentary check to the enemy.

> "Nor further might the quarry strain,
> Nor nearer might the dog attain;"

when the kangaroo suddenly turned round, evaded Jack's spring at his shoulder, and planted his back against a large gum-tree fairly "bailed up" at last. The dog was round again to the attack before Harold had

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pulled up and dismounted, and Jack, again missing his grip, was seized by the kangaroo and badly cut down the ribs by a stroke of the formidable nail on the animal's hind toe. Harold made a step forward to give it a blow with his stirrup-iron, as Joe had done earlier in the morning at the creek; but he reckoned without his host. One bound brought the kangaroo up to him, and he found himself tightly grasped in its arms, unable to wield his weapon, and being cut all over his shoulders by the garden-rake like claws of the angry beast, his shirt torn into rags, and the blood streaming from half a dozen wounds.

At the critical moment, when the kangaroo had nearly mastered its antagonist, Jack saw his opportunity, and, crippled as he was, sprang at the kangaroo's neck clear of its arms, and the three rolled over together. Harold's right hand being now freed, he hit the beast a crushing blow on the bridge of the nose with the stirrup-iron, which dazed it, and the dog got a better grip on its throat. Nevertheless, the kangaroo, making one supreme effort,

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struggled to its legs with Jack's teeth still fast in its throat. Harold swung the stirrup-iron to the full length of the leather, knocked the creature senseless, and ended all further resistance with his belt-knife. He had hardly recovered from his surprise at the stubborn resistance of the "old man," when Joe rode up, and seeing his torn and bleeding plight laughed out—

"Ha, ha, ha! tackled yer, did he? An' mauled yer too—proper. But, hullo"—as Jack limped towards him—"hurt the dog?"

Joe examined the wound—a long cut, clean as if done with a knife, and bleeding copiously, and swore he would never again risk the life of so valuable a cattle dog "over such a blarsted varmint" as a kangaroo. Skilfully forming a cup with his hands clasped together, the stockman got Harold to fill it from the water-bottle, and gave the dog a refreshing drink, bathed the wound, and tied it up to the best of his ability, with a long strip cut from down the back of his cotton shirt.

"A boomer he is, and no mistake," he

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remarked, contemplating the dead game, "run to nigh a couple o' hundredweight I should say; and what a fist he's got on him. Why, he might 'a let the guts out of yer."

The "fist," or fore-paw, was almost as large as a moderate-sized hand, and armed with strong curved nails, some of which were three inches in length, and twisted like a corkscrew. A very patriarch among foresters was this, whose courage had inspired Harold with considerable respect for the mild-eyed marsupials, and a determination in future to keep out of their clutches.

Joe tenderly lifted the dog on to his horse, and bidding Harold "good day," walked home beside the horse, holding Jack in his place.

For two or three days, Harold's wounds rendered him too stiff to do any work; but he pulled himself together when the overseer intimated one evening that he intended to try and shoot down some of the wild cattle in the scrubs on the Myall ranges, and would start that very night for the scene of operations with Joe and Pompey.

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"That pottering after kangaroos isn't any sort of fun, Bertram," he continued; "but it takes all your time to floor a 'clean-skin.'* If you're going with us, I'll put you on a good horse that'll stand if you get a 'buster.' I think I must have Boxer myself for this job."

Harold lost no time in getting his gun ready, and preparing his swag for the four days' camping-out they expected. Joe had long complained that he and his stockmen were being perpetually worried by these "scrubbers," which kept to the most broken and inaccessible rocky gorges on the range, seldom coming far out to feed except at night. The wild bulls had enticed away several of the Wallaroo cows, and demoralized the cattle on that side of the run, so that they had become difficult to manage.

The four men started in the afternoon, in order to get to their camping-ground at dusk and begin work as soon as it was light enough to see. The road lay through a rocky gorge, which cleft the Myall Hills, and gave passage to

* The term for unbranded and wild-bred cattle which have taken to the scrubs and become extremely dangerous.

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the creek over a boulder-strewn bed, where they were obliged to proceed with great care to avoid laming their horses—for there was no forge on Wallaroo, and all the horses, being used unshod, were much safer to ride and more sure-footed when going on the natural hoof. Indeed, Harold had long since noticed that Boxer, and all the others he had ridden, went well and securely over ground which no rider on a shod horse would have dared to face; and he had seen what prodigies Queensland cattle are capable of performing on their much softer feet. But the country they were about to traverse would inevitably cripple any horse called upon to do continuous work. The range of hills, with its patches of dense scrub, became a refuge for all the "rowdy" cattle in the neighbourhood, and their still more untractable descendants. To clear it out would have been impossible, with any number of men and the best horses, for these dangerous brutes, always ready to charge, either singly or in the mob, with the determination of bisons, could not be driven from their well-chosen fastnesses. An occasional raid upon

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them, like that now contemplated, was the only method of keeping them, at least for a time, from mixing with the quiet herds, their leaders, the bulls, being the principal objects of attack.

The defile extended for about a couple of miles through picturesque scenery, between rugged rocks often so closely approaching each other as to scarcely admit the passage of two horsemen abreast, and the clear stream now trickled through it only fetlock high; while all along the sides, among the bushes hung bunches of drift-wood and dead grass, brought down by floods, when the stream was converted into a raging torrent twenty feet deep. Through this narrow pass, ten years previously, as the overseer mentioned to Harold, had struggled the first pioneers of the rich western plains, with their bullock dray and scanty flocks and herds, to occupy the "promised land," as they gratefully named it, and become the discoverers of the Warrego, which, after fertilizing a large extent of country, sinks mysteriously into the unfathomed sand-beds whence the Darling is

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believed to rise and pour its waters into the mighty Murray.

Humphreys chose the camp with much judgment near the creek, sheltered by trees and rocks, where the "scrubbers" would not be alarmed by the sight of a fire. The horses were close hobbled and turned out under Pompey's care, with strict orders to keep them together all night, and bring them to camp at dawn.

Just as the men were turning in to their blankets, they heard a bull bellow in the distance, and, after a short interval a second challenge, succeeded by several repetitions.

Humphreys listened attentively, then observed, "Go it, old boy, you won't get much of a fight out of them echoes."

"What do you mean?" asked Harold.

"Why, can't you hear? There's only himself; but he hears his own voice among the hills and scrubs, and thinks there's a dozen more of 'em ready for him. Very likely he'll go rampin' about for hours this way, and when he happens to walk out of the gully, and doesn't hear any

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more echoes, he'll think he's licked the whole lot, and go to bed—like me."

So it proved. The reverberations ceased, and the bull, finding his challenge unanswered, no doubt satisfied himself that he was sole lord of the domain.

Before the golden glow of the sky had given place to the first rays of the sun, the three men, leaving Pompey to look after the camp, were quietly stealing over the softest ground they could pick, to a grass-tree flat, which the wild cattle frequented on moonlight nights, feeling pretty secure there, with a large scrub close at hand in case they were disturbed. From the precautions adopted, Harold saw how watchful the beasts must be.

"If they get the wind of us, or hear a word, or the rattle of a stirrup-iron, they'll clear out before we get a sight of them," said Humphreys. "I believe they know the sound of a horse's hoofs quite well from a bullock's; and they think a horse is up to no good here."

Keeping well within cover of the scrub, the overseer leading the way, they presently had

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a peep at the flat. Bill held up his hand as a signal to halt, watched the open ground for some moments, then beckoned the others on, and silently pointed. About a hundred and fifty yards away the backs of some twenty or thirty cattle could be seen who were feeding unsuspiciously, and the overseer thought a closer approach possible. At the first movement, however, a bull raised his head and looked full towards them.

"Joe," whispered Humphreys, "lend Bertram your rifle" (a breech-loading Bland carbine); "it's too far for the guns."

Joe and Harold accordingly changed weapons, and the latter dismounted for the chance of a steady shot. The bull now exhibited evident uneasiness, holding his nose high, and sniffing the air. Harold covered him, and, as he turned to bellow a warning to the mob, exposing his shoulder, fired.

"He's down, by jingo!" exclaimed Bill. "Clear out, boys; they're coming!"

Harold had just time to regain his gun, give Joe the rifle, and mount and get out of the

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way, when the mob came crashing into the scrub, the men wheeling their horses and closing in upon their tracks in full chase as they passed. What reckless galloping it was! The most awful ground he had ever seen—rocks, dead timber, tangled undergrowth, deep gullies, and treacherous holes. Harold hardened his heart, let the horse have its own way, and did his best to keep the tails of the mob in sight. Every moment he expected to come to grief; his brains knocked out by an overhanging branch, or his horse going head over heels among a mass of rocks. But the clever animal, accustomed to this sort of thing ever since it could run by its mother's side, dashed on in the track of the flying cattle, until Harold, in dismay, pulled it on to its haunches at the brink of a yawning chasm, where destruction must have been certain—one of the deep gullies that fed the creek in time of flood.

"Did they cross *that?*" he said to himself; "for if they did, they are every one of them smashed!"

He had not seen them (or, rather, the horse

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had not, or it would have followed) turn sharp to the left and keep along the gully; neither did he notice the beaten cattle-track, which would have shown him the direction they had taken. Where had they gone? He had no notion, though he could still hear a confused sound. He was out of it altogether now —that, at least, was certain, and the only thing to be done was to find his way back to camp by working down the bank of the creek, which could easily be found by any of the numerous gullies leading to it. But first, he thought, he would try to find the flat, where he fired at the bull—no easy task, as he had lost the bearings of it in the excitement of the run after the cattle. He tried for some time to no purpose; and, giving up the attempt, rode down to the creek.

When passing a patch of thick scrub, the horse suddenly plunged and snorted, and a bull rushed out, nearly catching the hind-quarters of the horse, but, as the beast passed, Harold saw that one of its fore-legs was dangling. Repeatedly did the vicious brute turn,

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and charge on three legs, while Harold slung his gun to the front, and at length staggered it with the right barrel, and sent another ball through its ribs. This, no doubt, was the animal he had wounded with the carbine, making for the creek to allay its thirst; and, desperate with pain and rage, even in its crippled state proved a formidable antagonist. Harold cut off the tuft of its tail just above the end of the bone, and rode away, well satisfied with having brought one of the "scrubbers" to bag.

Early in the afternoon, Joe arrived in a state of copious perspiration, carrying his saddle on his head, and his bridle and carbine in his hands. An excellent man was Joe, but endowed with a genius for swearing between every word when thoroughly put out; and this seemed a proper occasion for the display of his rich vocabulary. As Harold managed to gather his story, divested of ornamentation, Joe had killed two young bulls during the hunt; and, while chasing another, a cow, fearful for her calf, charged and struck his horse under the

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shoulder. He managed to escape any further mischief, and shot the cow; but the horse was done for, and he had "humped this bloomin' lot five miles through them scrubs, and 'Jerry' doubled up by a cow, too."

The stockman never cried over spilt milk. Within ten minutes, he was off to the cattle-yards on Harold's horse, to bring up two fresh horses for this severe work.

Humphreys also met with bad luck. He had wounded one of the "scrubbers" in a terribly rough gully, and Boxer, endeavouring to head the animal, stumbled and fell—"all over me, and I don't know which got up first"—the overseer finished his narrative.

Arrangements were made, as soon as Joe returned, for moving the camp three miles higher up the creek to a part of the scrub which had not yet been disturbed, and the same precautions were taken to conceal the fire from the cattle.

During the night, or, rather, towards morning, Harold was awakened by a strange noise—a low moaning, varied by short, angry bellow-

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ings, and now and then a dull thud. He roused Humphreys, who, after listening a moment, exclaimed, "Bulls fighting, by jingo!" and began to pull on his boots. "It's no use calling Joe—*he* won't budge."

In a very short time, the two men were creeping stealthily through the scrub, weapon in hand, and about a quarter of a mile from camp came upon a singular scene. In one of those small natural clearings, some half an acre in extent, frequently met with in scrubby country, were two bulls who had selected this as their battle-ground for the leadership of the herd. By the half-light of an old moon could be seen two dusky forms, one of which was considerably larger than the other, engaged in a deadly struggle, their horns locked together, striving to force each other to the ground, while their heavy breathing, deep groans, and fierce, low bellowings betokened the fury of the fray. The men were enabled to creep unobserved to the cover of a tree not forty yards from the combatants, where they stood some time watching the battle, which inspired them

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with a feeling almost of awe by its savage determination.

"We shall nail 'em both," whispered Bill, gleefully.

Harold knew that his spherical ball, driven by three and a half drachms of powder, would have a more crushing effect at the distance than a rifle bullet. It was decided that both should fire the first barrel at the same bull, to make certain, and chance the other with the second. The larger of the two staggered a few yards and fell over stone dead, and its antagonist, not hearing or not heeding the report of the guns, rushed forward and plunged its horns into the prostrate foe, but only to feel, in the next instant, a like death-dealing shock. The bull wheeled round in evident confusion, and was immediately lost to sight in the deep shadows of the scrub, where they could hear him tearing through the undergrowth far away in the distance; but not, as the overseer observed, with any probability that he would "carry them two pills very far."

The dead bull, when examined by the light

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of wisps of dry grass, proved to be terribly scored about the shoulders and head, and plastered with blood. One eye was punched in, a flap of flesh, the size of a man's hand, hung from the cheek, and many other wounds showed the desperate character of the contest for supremacy which had been ended so abruptly.

Humphreys cut off the tail-tuft, remarking, "It ought to be framed and glazed for a curiosity."

On the following day, they beat a large extent of scrub with no result; but, after noon, well-beaten tracks leading to rising ground put them all on the look-out, and Humphreys had scarcely answered with a nod Harold's suppressed observation, "I can smell a camp," when they found themselves surrounded by a large mob, lying down during the heat of the day.

For the next few seconds the situation was as lively as the most ardent hunter of "dangerous game" could have desired. The cattle sprang to their feet, rushing hither and thither

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in wild confusion and surprise, their heads down and tails up, charging right and left. How the horsemen came out of it alive Harold never knew. His own horse cleared out of the stampeding mob as hard as it could gallop, and when he managed to pull it round a bull crossed his path, to which he devoted his attention immediately. It was impossible to close with the beast or get a shot among the timber and long, dry, wiry grass, with dead wood concealed beneath it, so Harold raced the animal hard, and at length worked it into clearer ground. This mob had been blowing themselves out all night on the sweet, succulent grass that had grown on a piece of burnt country, and the bull felt the effect of his indulgence in his failing wind at the pace he was going. Racing slightly in advance of the horse, the bull suddenly half-stopped, flung his head round, and struck the saddle, tearing the knee-pad clean off. Harold was quick enough to save his leg by throwing it on to the wither of the horse, while the horn ripped a long ugly wound in the horse's shoulder. Had the charge been more

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direct, horse and man would have gone over together with disastrous consequences.

Harold's blood was now up, and he slung his gun round for a snap shot; but the "mickey" had had enough of this furious galloping. He pulled up completely "pumped," and stood pawing the ground and shaking his head, his tongue hanging out and his sides heaving. Harold, feeling that the horse would not stand, was off immediately and on his knee covering the bull. Horror, the right barrel missed fire! There were scarcely twenty yards between him and the furious animal, which came on at a rush, with its head down. In that critical moment everything was impressed upon his mind with photographic intensity—a massive forehead with a white star in the middle of it, a pair of levelled horns, a flash from the barrel that shut the star from view, and a heavy fall close beside him. The bull had received the ball right in the "curl" on his forehead, and it had crashed into his brain with destructive force. Stone dead he lay, a thin scarlet stream trickling over the white

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patch, one horn half buried in the ground and the fore-legs sprawled wide apart.

"That was a touch-and-go affair," thought Harold to himself. "That fellow would have crumpled me up like a bandbox if the other cap had missed fire."

He carefully skinned off the white star with the hole in it, secured the tail-tuft, and then looked round for his horse. Fortunately, when he dismounted, he pulled the bridle over its head, and it had put its foot through the loop, so that he had little difficulty in catching the poor creature, which presented a sorry spectacle, bleeding profusely from its shoulder, and rode slowly back to the camp.

The overseer and the stockman came in later on, Bill leading Boxer, who was lame in the shoulder, and Joe cut about the face and carrying his left arm in a sling, extemporized from one of his stirrup-leathers.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Bill, on seeing Harold mopping his horse's wound with cold water. "More cripples! Well, this *has* been a rough day. Here's Boxer sprained his shoulder, too,

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and Joe's got such a 'buster' he won't be fit for a week, if he hasn't broken his arm, and your horse is about done for, I can see. We've had enough of the job for this time, and we'll get back to the station to-night."

Bill lighted his pipe, and told Harold how they had run down the mob for some miles, shooting three bulls and six cows; how Joe's horse had fallen with him into a hole, and he thought the stockman was killed; and how Boxer sprained his shoulder in turning a bull, regretting most of all that these accidents happened when the mob was completely knocked up, all the charging pluck galloped out of them, and they might have been shot down "just anyhow." "But," he concluded, "they've had such a doing as they won't forget for many a day, and there's eight bulls less to come poaching on our young grass, and sneak away with the cows."

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CHAPTER III.

Unexpected News and a Consultation upon it—To Brisbane on Business—Bill Humphreys' Advice—Harold goes to the Barcoo—"Burra-Burra" Station—Round the Run—Teaching a Buck-jumper "Manners"—A Storm of Locusts—The Mighty Dead—"Chin-chin," the Chinese Cook—A Small Tragedy in the Bush—An Attack by Land Leeches.

WHILE Harold was unsaddling his horse at the door of the overseer's hut, Keene came running down from "the house," shouting, "Good luck, old man. Be quick and open your letters; you'll be a squatter soon. My uncle says that you've had a lump of cash left you, and he's been entrusted with the pleasure of 'minding' it for you, till you go and bag it."

Harold lost no time in getting at the contents of his letters—only the second batch he had received since he landed in Australia, nearly a year ago. In addition to a letter from his

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father, with the home news and a bank draft, was one from his brother Alfred, the solicitor, informing him that a distant relation had died and left him £4000, which had been forwarded to the care of Keene and Co., Brisbane.

"What do you think of that, Charlie?" handing the letter over. "But I don't know what to do with it."

"Oh, if it's the tin you mean—do with it, man? Why, of course, set up in the squatting line, and I'll come and be your—no, blowed if I do though, Hal; I've had quite enough store-keeping and butchering here to last me all my life, and I mean to clear out of this when you go."

"But it's not enough for sheep-farming; this business needs a large capital now."

"Nonsense; 'not enough.' Why, you can always get as much again advanced by a bank —or very likely Keene and Co.—at ten per cent., and you'll make twenty per cent. on it; and, with any sort of luck, be clearing off the debt with your wool and increase from the stock bought with your own money."

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Humphreys looked in at the door, and noticing the letters lying about, retreated with, "Ah, having a private talk, I see. I'll come in by-and-by."

"No, no," said Harold, jumping up. "It's no secret from *you.* Come here."

The thoroughly straightforward character of the overseer had won the respect of both the young men, and a still warmer regard from Harold, who frankly took him into his confidence and asked his opinion.

Humphreys cut up a pipe of hard tobacco, rubbed it between his hands meditatively, lighted it, and smoked some time. "Well, it isn't much, to be sure. If you put it into sheep on your own account, you'll have a bloomin' uphill game for years to come; and a drought or a wet season might knock it all down."

"Not supposing *you* were to go partners with me; and"—(hesitatingly) "you told me you had saved some money—share a small run on fair terms."

Bill shook his head doubtfully. "My little bit wouldn't help yours far, though I should

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be glad to work with you. No; the best you can do is to take a share in a well-settled run, and look after your own stock yourself; then you'd stand back to back with another man to fight against a bad time, and all the more chance of pulling through. MacNab, now, would jump at the offer, for Wallaroo isn't half stocked, and you know what a prime run it is by this time. I thought so," he laughed, observing Harold's gesture of dissent. "I didn't much think you'd care about yoking up with the boss *here*, on any sort of terms."

Keene, who had sat on the edge of a bunk, swinging his legs impatiently, broke in. "What's the use of all this palaver? I tell you, Humphreys, £4000 is as good as double when you know how to finance it, and that part of the business Bertram can consult my uncle about. As to rest of it, you are right enough, I'll go bail any day."

Harold informed MacNab in general terms that he had come into a small property, and was about to start for Brisbane, while Keene told the squatter that he should accompany his friend.

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MacNab, thinking that he scented prey, made an awkward attempt at congratulation, and invited the young men up to "the house" to dinner and a chat over a bottle of wine to celebrate the good fortune, and he would have a bed got ready.

Harold, who had never been asked inside the place since the night of his arrival at Wallaroo, and had worked as hard as any of the paid hands during the past year, replied coldly, "I think not, thank you, Mr. MacNab. There's a beast to be got in for killing early in the morning, and my old quarters will do for me while I am here."

Harold and Keene packed up their trunks, and started in company with the drivers of a bullock-team, taking wool down to the railway —camping out every night, of course, not a little to Charlie Keene's disgust, who "had hoped that some little comfort might be found under the bed of a dray."

In Brisbane, Harold was introduced to Keene's uncle, and completed his business arrangements satisfactorily. Half an hour's conversation with

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Keene senior put him in possession of the general principles on which sheep-farming is "financed." He obtained from this energetic general agent introductions to a few trustworthy squatters in the Maranoa and Mitchell districts, who would give him every opportunity for judging where and how he could most advantageously invest his money in a share of a station; and it was pointed out that, for working purposes, his capital might be considered doubled, if he could satisfy a bank manager that he knew his business, and had a sound investment in view.

A week in Brisbane proved more than enough for Harold. Let those who would indulge in the artificial pleasures and excitements of town life, they had no attractions for him. The noble river rolling down to the sea, bearing ships crammed to the hatchways with wealth in the shape of bales of wool, was a pleasant enough sight, too, he confessed to himself. As for him, however, he would hurry back to the redolent gum-forests and wide-reaching plains, and see the golden fleece

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growing on the backs of—yes, before long it might be *his own* sheep—and live the free life of the Bushman, under the canopy of heaven, far from the stifling sense of surrounding walls and the ceaseless clamour of those who, "in populous cities pent," preyed upon each other and the stranger in the land. His heart panted for—

> "Broad streams and gladdening rills,
> For flocks that roam on every hand,
> For herds on thousand hills.
>
> * * * * *
>
> The shadowy purple on the mountains sleeping,
> The sapphire of unutterable sheen,
> The beauty-harvest ever ripe for reaping."

He loathed the sight of human crowds, and the dust and bustle of the town. Such was his mood until he galloped up to the slip-rails at Wallaroo, having left "civilization" four hundred miles behind, and felt the hearty hand-grasp of Bill Humphreys, and the exuberant welcome of his faithful dog.

That night they sat up late by the light of the fat-lamp, planning the future, and making calculations as to the best method of investing

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a small capital in sheep-farming. Harold laid all his introductions before the overseer, who put his finger on that directed to Thomas Gray, Esq., Burra-Burra, Blue Ranges, Barcoo, Mitchell.

"I know him; he's a right good sort; and you might spend a time with him. The country is rough in places; but the hundred square miles would carry four times the stock he has. It's about a hundred and fifty miles or so to the north-west, at the head of the Barcoo. There's a big thing to be made out of 'Burra-Burra' in the next ten years, if there was money enough to work it, though it is a long way out, and the Blacks are very bad at times. He's had a tough fight to make that station."

A few days after this conversation Harold was on the way to the Barcoo with one of the stockmen, whose engagement had just terminated, and a couple of steady horses, for which he had paid fifty pounds to MacNab by a cheque on the National Bank.

His companion, a canny Caledonian, known

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as "Scotty," had travelled that way with cattle, and knew something of the country between the Maranoa and the head waters of the Barcoo; but Harold's compass proved of much greater service than the man's imperfect recollection, when used in conjunction with a rough map which Bill had sketched out for him, showing the general run of the streams, and the approximate positions of shepherds' huts and cattle-yards. By keeping an almost due north-westerly course he must arrive, in less than a week's travelling, at the easterly extension of the Warrego ranges, which formed the water-shed of that river and its tributaries, and also of the Maranoa, while from their northern slopes fell Burra Creek and other affluents of the Barcoo. There was no fear of ever having to camp without water, for he would cross a perfect network of creeks, feeders of the Warrego, as well as that river itself. In one day's journey, indeed, they crossed fifteen creeks, and Harold, casting his eye over this splendid country, thought how disastrous it would prove in flood time to a squatter who

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did not exercise extreme caution in the management of his flocks. On the other hand, in the driest season, no drought need be apprehended here. A thunderstorm on any part of this collecting area would fill the whole basin of the Warrego with its affluents, the Nive, the Ward, and hosts of smaller streams, and avert such a calamity.

Descending the northern slopes of the Warrego range, a beautiful panorama lay before the travellers, flooded with the rays of a February afternoon sun. Far away over the shimmering sea of tree-tops stretching below them, long lines of ridges sloped from the main range to the level country in the blue distance, forming the valley of the River Victoria; while a grand amphitheatre of hills swept round to the westward, and dipped gradually down to a succession of small plains which lay between the ridges. This was the watershed of the Barcoo. Every dry gully-head they crossed was the source of some creek, which, a few miles farther to the northward, held pools of limpid water, and at length became a continuous stream, well

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supplied, even in this dry weather. What a wealth of timber clothed all these slopes—red-gum, "peppermint," iron-bark, stringy-bark, and the whole tribe of *Myrtaceæ!* The grass, now turned into hay as it stood, and much shrunken, still in many places reached the stirrup-irons; and the ferns in the shady gullies often brushed their faces as they rode through them. Ground game sprang up on all sides, and flights of "squatter" pigeons fled before the horses, skimming the top of the grass, and settling again within a hundred yards. The forest resounded with strange calls. "Crack" went the vocal whip of the "coachman" bird, and, oddly enough, another bird would supply the sharp "cluck-cluck" of the tongue in the cheek with which four-in-hand Jarvey is wont to urge his team, so that the illusion of a coach being driven through the forest was complete. High overhead the great black macaw would rend the air with his unutterably harsh scream; or a flight of parrots flashed past like ten thousand green and golden arrows touched by the sun-glints, and so near

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the faces of the horsemen as to fairly startle them for the moment. Incalculable numbers of cicadas, basking on the heated surface of the tree trunks, would suddenly burst into a chorus of shrill stridulations, literally rendering the men unable to hear each other's voices, and as suddenly cease. The dry, hot air reeked with the aroma of the red gum exuding from the blue-grey stems of these stately columns, which reared their heads two hundred and fifty feet above the earth to meet the fervid sun.

It was one of those scorching days late in summer which tell severely on man and beast, and right glad were the travellers when the barking of dogs and the sight of Burra-Burra paddock fence announced that their journey was at an end.

"Scotty" went off to the men's huts, and Harold, riding up to the verandah just as a burly man stepped out upon it, was greeted with a cheerful "good evening," and soon found himself quite at home with Mr. Gray's little household. His eye was at once struck

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with many evidences of taste and refinement, such as he had not yet met with in the Bush—due to the superintendence of a woman, in the best sense of the term a lady, although washing, scrubbing, and cleaning were a necessary part of her daily life.

Mrs. Gray received Harold with simple, unconstrained courtesy, and after supper went into the next room, merely slab partitioned from the other, to make him up a bed, which, to his astonishment when he turned in, displayed a pair of sheets!

Mr. Gray, having read Harold's letter of introduction, it was arranged that they should ride round and see part of the run on the morrow; and, learning that one of the Wallaroo men had come up with his guest, he decided to engage "Scotty" for the approaching busy time.

The head station was charmingly placed in a natural clearing on a bend of a permanent stream, named "Burra" Creek, a tributary of the River Barcoo. A strong, three-roomed slab house, "shingle" roofed, with detached kitchen,

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stood on rising ground, about two hundred yards from the clear little stream, and round it were clustered the men's huts, the wool-shed, store-house, and stock-yards.

On a spot so picturesque—with the spur of the range rising in the purple distance, the silvery rivulet sparkling at the foot of the knoll, some miles of well-grassed plain stretching beyond, and lofty gum-forests clothing the ridges to the north and east—here was a position fit for a ducal mansion.

Mr. Gray was proud of his home, and determined to make the most of its natural advantages. The out-stations on the run were simple slab huts, with a stock-yard for the men who worked the cattle—some of these huts being ten miles from the head station. The tenants of these led a lonely life, rarely seeing any one except the squatter on his weekly rounds, or the ration-carrier, if they chanced to have got home with their sheep when he brought their supplies.

The greater number of the sheep were pastured within three or four miles of the

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head station; but seven miles out was a flock of fifteen hundred wethers, under the care of "Dandy," an old convict who had gained his freedom many years previously—one of the best men on the run. A clever shearer and wool-sorter, and a useful hand all round, "Dandy" was well worth the forty pounds a year which Mr. Gray paid him; for none of the shepherds brought their flocks up to the shearing-shed in such first-rate condition.

A few sheep had been lost from this flock occasionally through the Blacks dashing in among them while they were scattered over the heavily timbered land where they fed; but this was regarded as one of the inevitable chances of sheep-farming in a wild country and not a sufficient reason for serious apprehension.

Generally speaking, they were harmless enough, and when they chose to gather firewood, strip bark for roofing huts, or help in sheep-washing, the pay in sugar, tobacco, and flour for a day's work would keep them in luxury for a week. Mr. Gray had always a

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friendly feeling for the aborigines, whose hunting-grounds were now usurped by his sheep and cattle—making due allowance for the sense of irritation which this constant reminder of their loss engendered. So far as was possible, he gave assistance to the old and feeble, setting his face sternly against all the acts of wanton brutality and oppression which were too common in the back country.

The run was a hundred square miles—at present carrying about fifteen thousand head of sheep and four thousand cattle—and short-handed for that amount of stock. Besides Mr. Gray, his wife, and two children, there were only eight whites on that hundred square miles of Bush. Mrs. Gray was often left alone at the head station, with no better protector than the old Chinaman, who acted as cook and general servant. On these occasions the Blacks made themselves very obnoxious—pestering the cook for sugar, loafing about the house, and behaving insolently. Many a weary and anxious hour during their visits Mrs. Gray sat on the verandah with a double-barrelled gun across

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her lap—and quite determined to use it, if necessary.

"It's going to be another scorcher to-day," remarked Mr. Gray, as he mounted his horse—about the ugliest, ewe-necked beast Harold thought he had ever seen.

Not far outside the slip-rails the brute humped its back, and began bucking furiously, the first unexpected bound almost jerking Mr. Gray over the cantle of the saddle. But he quickly got his feet jammed home in the stirrups, pulled the horse's head up as soon as the reins slackened, and brought the heavy handle of his stock-whip down with all his strength between the brute's ears. Keeping the reins as tight as possible, the rider showered a succession of violent blows upon the horse's head until it began to stagger like a drunken man.

"You would, eh? take that, then, and learn better manners, or I'll knock the brains out of you if you play that trick on me again. That's the way to serve them," he continued, to Harold; "only get well hold of them before they get their heads stuck down between their fore-legs,

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and give it them between the ears, and you're pretty well master of the situation. But once they get all the bridle through your hands, its a case of sitting out the whole performance. I once cured one of these gentry in a funny way. It was mustering time, and I wanted to take a bottle of whiskey down to the men; so I jumped on the first horse I saw hitched up to the rails (it turned out to be one belonging to my bullock driver, who had brought up some stores for the station), and the moment I was across his back he began his capers. I was going to be slung, that's certain, when I thought of the bottle, and I smashed it over his head the first chance I got for a steady blow at him. Whether it was the fright at the broken glass or the liquor running down his face I don't know, but the man told me that whenever the horse showed signs of being nasty after that, he'd only to raise his hand and shout 'Whiskey,' and the rascal dropped into a quiet canter at once! But Larry was a bit of a wag in his way," laughed the squatter.

After a look at the flocks near home, they

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galloped off to Dandy's, and found the old man just moving his sheep quietly from their feeding-ground towards the yards. These wethers were in splendid condition, and quieter than any Harold had yet seen; but on catching sight of Don, they bolted *en masse* for a distance of some three hundred yards, then faced about and slowly advanced in serried ranks to examine the strange creature, many of them having never seen a dog in their lives until now, for Dandy preferred to do his work without such assistance.

Bidding the old shepherd "good evening," they turned to jog leisurely homewards. The sun hung over the western horizon in a brazen sky, the whole landscape glowing with a yellow light to the very crests of the distant range.

Mr. Gray remarked on the peculiarity of the light, and, as some few clouds, like the wrack of a coming storm, swept across the sun's disc, he observed hesitatingly, "I should *almost* think we were in for a change of weather, only I don't expect rain from the north at this time of year. We get the thunder-showers from the

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south at the end of the summer, but there's evidently wind up there, driving that brash, though it's calm enough down here. What do you think of it, Bertram?"

"It puzzles me," replied Harold; "they're the queerest clouds I ever saw—so streaky—and look at that roundish patch, with a tail like a comet's, moving to the southward; and the other just above it reminds me of a swarm of bees in the air, but that it is such an immense size. And what's that mist rolling over the plain in front? It can't be dust, surely. You remember, when we came across to-day, the grass was up to the horses' knees."

So they rode on, questioning and wondering, while the sun darkened and the clouds drove towards them.

"Here it comes," said Mr. Gray, as the heavy patter fell upon the tree tops; "if we don't hurry up, we shall get a soaking."

He had scarcely uttered the words when the storm broke over them—*but without a drop of rain.* A heavy shower of great green locusts, three inches long, fell all about them, and they

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pulled up for a moment in blank astonishment, Mr. Gray exclaiming, "Good heavens! what's this?" and the frightened horses became almost uncontrollable.

Emerging now from the forest upon a plain some two miles broad, they encountered the unbroken force of this storm of insects. Here the locusts rained from above in myriads, and sprang from the grass in countless multitudes, borne on their swift wings against the faces of the men, every blow stinging like a hailstone.

All around not a glimpse of the country could be seen; and the sun was blotted out by the great living cloud, swirling about them with the sound of a mighty rushing wind. Nothing was visible fifty yards ahead. The horses galloped on through it all, while the men bent their heads and guarded themselves as best they could against the blinding hurricane of flying locusts, which smashed wherever they struck, and covered both the riders and their horses with a sticky green slime. Speaking to one another was out of the question, amidst

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the rattle of the insect tempest all about their heads, as they cowered down over the horses' necks, unable to see where they were going, but trusting to the instinct of the animals to carry them home, while the latter could hardly keep their feet on the slippery sheet of locusts spread over the bare, sun-dried patches on the plain.

At length, after a hard gallop of some miles, the storm was left behind; the sun still hung out in the brazen sky, and, looking back, they saw the yellow light reflected from the vast retreating cloud, which continued to sweep onward towards the south.

"This beats everything in creation!" exclaimed the squatter. "For five years I haven't seen more than a score of locusts at a time on the run, here and there; but in that lot there must be ever so many square miles of them, as close as they can pack. I suppose they've been starved out on the dry country to the north-west, and have come to eat us up now."

The men were in a filthy state, plastered

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from head to foot with green greasy matter exuded from the squashed insects; their outside pockets and the tops of their boots filled with a mixture of broken legs, wings, heads, and locust paste.

Mrs. Gray received them with exclamations of astonishment when they laid their bespattered saddles on the verandah, and presented themselves in such an extraordinary pickle. She had seen the clouds—rain clouds as she believed them—driving across the sky, but not a single insect fell near the house to suggest their real character.

Starting early in the morning for a long day on the outskirts of the run, Mr. Gray took Harold down the creek to visit a shepherd before they struck off to the western boundary. The Burra made a wide sweeping curve, about a mile below the head station, from east to west, directly across the line of the locusts' flight, and here was presented a sight which, as Mr. Gray remarked, "A man wouldn't want to see twice in a lifetime, even if he was likely to."

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From bank to bank, the stream, twenty yards wide, was choked by the bodies of drowned locusts, completely hiding the water, and reflecting the morning sun from the gauzy wings of the upper layer of insects still struggling to free themselves from their dead companions. Strange, indeed, was the effect of this surface-movement of glittering wings over the inert dead mass below—the hopeless effort of the survivors to fight their way out of the entanglement, each striving to make a bridge of its neighbour, and each pulling the other back into the seething mass.

The men urged their reluctant horses across the creek. Every step seemed placed upon a semi-solid mass knee-deep. No water splashed the animals' legs, and no sound came from their hoofs on the gravelly bottom. The whole bed of the creek was filled with the dead and dying, the weaklings and stragglers from the mighty host which had swept across the country.

All the way for a mile further along the stream the green carcases floated in a thick

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scum, and here and there a few locusts, the remains of the departed army, disturbed by the tread of the horses, sprang from the ground and shot past the riders on flashing wings—beautiful objects in the morning sun.

"All that in the creek will be a mass of corruption by to-morrow, surely?" queried Harold.

"Ah, that it will, and poison the water—I don't know how far—perhaps for the next fifty miles, right away to the Barcoo. How lucky they passed below the head station!"

Soon afterwards they met with one of the shepherds, who recounted how he had been caught in the storm of "them blarned critturs," and how the sheep had galloped home without him, while his dog was "struck that silly," that he slunk to his master's side and refused to work.

Mr. Gray then led on towards a strip of country from which the dry grass had been carefully burned some weeks previously, and where the delicate green sprouts had begun to show well after the thunder-showers; this being

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reserved for his choice ewe flock. Great, therefore, was his disappointment to find the whole of it, more than a square mile, cleaned bare. Instead of the refreshing green that he expected, the earth presented a uniform, dull brown, without so much as a blade of grass the size of a pin left by the devouring locusts.

"Well, thank Heaven, they have gone on!" was his philosophical comment. "I was told once by a squatter on the Darling, that they settled down on his run, and just shaved twenty square miles bare in a week—and, I couldn't have believed it if I didn't know I could trust his word—the cattle, and sheep, and horses actually fed on the fat locusts covering the ground, and seemed to like them."

They had now reached within a mile or two of the western confines of the run, seven or eight miles from the head station, which the owner told Harold he intended to stock as soon he could raise the money for building five huts and yards, and putting about eight thousand "new blood" sheep upon it from the refined

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flocks on Mount Hutton Station, some two hundred miles to the eastward. The appearance of the country here was quite strange to Harold—flat and hungry-looking, grassless and waterless, sparsely covered with stunted trees and isolated bushes, bearing dull green, dusty leaves.

"Do you mean to stock *this* with sheep?" he inquired.

"Yes, of course; and I wish half the run was like it. They do well on that 'salt-bush'—get down and taste a leaf of it—now don't spit it out right off, chew it; and, remember, wherever you see that plant, there's meat and drink for sheep, and a wonderful stand-by in dry weather."

Harold threw all his energies into station work, doing the store-keeping and killing, when Mr. Gray and others were busy, and helping with everything going on. From the squatter he soon gathered a good general idea of the debtor and creditor account of Burra-Burra, while on his own part he felt no necessity for reticence as to his private affairs, and his desire to invest in sheep as soon as he could

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find a good opening, and felt thoroughly competent to take care of his own interests.

Mr. Gray advised him to wait at least another year and look about him, giving him also *carte blanche* to remain as long as he pleased on Burra-Burra, or, if the chance offered, join any party that might be going further out in quest of new country. With the help of "Long Tom," one of the stockmen, he got up three cows, and broke them in to milking, much to Mrs. Gray's satisfaction; for, after her youngest child was weaned, when one cow, since gone wild again, was in use, no milk had been seen in the house —a luxury rare indeed in the Bush, though thousands of cattle are close at hand. The children now, however, had an abundant supply, the old Chinaman (all Chinese in Australia are "old" by prescription) taking kindly to the cows when Harold had taught him the art of milking.

This wanderer from the Celestial Empire, who passed by the name of "Chin-chin," or, for short, "Chin," was a singular specimen of humanity. His dried-up yellow frame, clothes

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and all, would not have weighed more than seven stone. His eyes showed two little black beads set in the middle of oblique slits in his parchment face, and beneath a mere excuse for a nose were implanted (for they could not be said to grow) half a dozen straight, dark, wiry hairs on each side.

But "Chin's" pride and glory was his hair; closely shaved from the front and crown to display a *pair* of leathery ears, and proclaim to all the world that he had never been "in trouble," its whole luxuriance was concentrated in a pigtail as thick as one of his arms, reaching almost to his heels, and decorated at the end with a bow of blue serge. Art, it was thought, had more to do than nature with this appendage to Chin's head; for had he not been detected surreptitiously pulling hair from the tail of a horse which, it was believed, his skilful fingers had woven into a scanty tuft really belonging to his own scalp? No one could understand why he had come so far out into the Bush, to earn wages less than half of those of an ordinary shepherd, or knew whence he

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came. Two years previously, he had walked up to the station, with a small bundle in his hand, and announced himself to Mrs. Gray as "Me Johnny—Cookee," and had scarcely ever been heard to speak since, though he was quick at apprehending anything that was wanted of him. On trial he was found to be so good a cook, and so deft at housework, that he had become a fixture on the station. The bit of garden-ground, with its pumpkins, water-melons, and sweet potatoes, was due to his industry, and added no little to the comfort of the family. Melancholy seemed to have taken possession of a countenance on which no smile was ever seen; but this might have been due to his habit of smoking opium—a drug manufactured by himself from poppies, whose seeds he must have brought with him. He never bought anything from the stores, except the most necessary clothing. His cheques were hoarded somewhere in artless confidence that they would be duly honoured whenever he should take himself off to his native land to set up as an independent gentleman, and smoke

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himself to death with opium. In the meantime, Chin had become an institution, and a general favourite even with the rough men on the run.

Coming home one afternoon from the cattle-yards, Harold was an unobserved and astonished spectator of a tragedy often enacted in the solitudes of the Australian Bush. He had dismounted to re-arrange his saddle-cloth in such a manner that it should the better protect a raw place on the horse's wither; and, while busy at this, heard the peculiar voices of Blacks raised in loud altercation, exhortation, or remonstrance. By-and-by, three black "gins," too much engaged with their own affairs to notice him, came in sight through the forest. Both were heavily laden with opossum rugs and the spare weapons of their men. The younger of them dragged along a large wallaby by the hind legs, and carried something slung upon her back. The women stopped and spoke together a few words of consultation apparently, which ended by the younger dropping the wallaby, and taking the burden from her back. He saw

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distinctly, for the space of a moment, a young child swinging by the leg in her hand and heard a low, wailing cry, succeeded by a dull blow. The woman took up the wallaby and marched on after her companion with seeming unconcern.

Harold, prompted both by curiosity and a more serious feeling, walked to the spot, leading his horse. At the foot of a tree lay the body of an infant a year old, its skull smashed, and its limbs still twitching. Thus the young mother had rid herself of one of her burdens!

On hearing the description of the occurrence from Harold at supper-time, Mr. Gray, after expressing his uneasiness that wandering Blacks were about the run, continued, "That is common enough. I believe more than half the children are disposed of in that way; or else, if game is scarce, they get eaten instead. And it is generally the female children, perhaps because the mother has had such a hard time herself, she doesn't like the thought of her youngster being knocked about, half starved, and slaved to death. But I don't think they have much feeling about it."

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"Oh, don't say that, Tom," interposed Mrs. Gray. "They *must* have some affection for their children, surely, even if they don't display it much before us. Only think what a terrible life of hardship they lead, and the cruelty they endure, when they are on the march especially. There is the poor thing loaded with the weapons and game, toiling along, footsore and weary, leading one child by the hand and carrying another on her back. Worn out with fatigue, which of all those burdens *dare* she lay down? Maybe she has had this agonizing thought in her mind for days, and at length the dreadful choice must be made, if she is to keep up with her husband and cook the wallaby when they camp, or else incur some terrible punishment. I cannot bear to think of this miserable mother, driven to tear asunder with her own hands the tie that binds her to 'bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh.' And what she must have gone through before she sacrificed her innocent babe!" And Mrs. Gray's eyes plainly betrayed her maternal sympathy.

"I dare say you are right, my dear Jenny,"

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replied her husband. "If she had left the wallaby behind instead of the baby there would have been a row when she got to camp—a kick in the ribs with a hob-nailed boot would have been a joke to it."

On the following day, the squatter proposed that Harold should accompany him to a sheep-yard and help to mend the fence, suggesting also that it might be as well to take a gun on the chance of getting a brush turkey, Mr. Gray himself carrying a short American axe, for cutting the necessary stakes.

Having made the yard quite secure, they turned the horses inside it, and proceeded to beat a scrub at no great distance from the shepherd's hut. Although the scrub swarmed with wallabies, which they did not want, and the heavy flight of a turkey was heard in the distance, no success rewarded an hour's beat. Mr. Gray, being a stout man, suffered from the close heat, and they sat down upon a fallen tree for a brief rest.

By-and-by, Harold, feeling something clammy on his leg, pulled up his trousers, when, greatly

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to his surprise, he saw a streak of dark blood on his calf, and a slimy object rolled down into the folds of his sock.

"Ugh! what's this beastly slug?" he exclaimed.

Mr. Gray laughed. "Slug! why, man, that's a leech; but I quite forgot to tell you that there are any amount of them in these scrubs, and to tuck your trousers into your socks, like mine. Then they can't very well get at your legs. But let's look, I dare say there are more —you can never feel them bite."

Harold bared his other leg, and was about to snatch at a leech hanging to his ankle, when Gray caught his hand.

"Don't pull it off, or you'll have a nasty sore place where the bit of skin is nipped out. Wait a moment, now" (lighting a match, and applying the flame to the swollen body of the leech), "that makes him open his mouth sharp—there!" And, squeezing the leech between his finger and thumb, "He's been sucking your blood some time; but I'll make him sick"—as the dark venous fluid dropped upon the earth.

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"Now, take off your socks. Ah, I expected as much!"

Patches of blood marked the places where the leeches had been at work, and several had become crushed to a jelly in his boots.

"I've found it a good plan," resumed the squatter, "to grease my feet and legs with mutton fat. They don't seem to like the slippery stuff; but you can generally beat them by turning your socks tight over outside your trousers, and then even sometimes they will crawl up and bite you on the neck. The curious thing is you can't feel them on your skin nor when they begin to suck either. I had a dreadful leg once from pulling one off. The place itched and then festered about a week afterwards, and it wouldn't heal properly for a month. Always give them a touch with a match or a fire-stick. That frizzles their skins up and makes them let go. Now, look there, they've smelt us out sitting here."

From beneath the damp leaves and mould a score of leeches were crawling steadily towards the men's feet, now and again raising them-

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selves upright on their tails and swinging their heads from side to side, as though feeling in the air for their prey, and advancing by alternately bending their bodies into loops and extending them at regular intervals. The bloodthirsty creatures were of all sizes, some the thickness of a goose quill, others as fine as whip-cord, and all of a dark olive green, marked with longitudinal orange stripes.

Harold and his companion watched them curiously until the foremost of the attacking party began to ascend their boots. The leeches explored every possible means of gaining access to the men's feet round the seams of their boots, and one of the thinnest had nearly squeezed itself through a lace-hole, when Harold thought it time to pull the intruder out by the tail and get away from a spot infested by such uncanny blood-suckers.

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CHAPTER IV.

Singular Capture of a Bushranger—Trouble with the Blacks—Murder of a Shepherd—A Night Ride of Forty Miles—Dandy's Grave—Raid on the Camp—Retribution—Death of "Murray Jack"—Harold takes a Flock at the Seven-mile Hut—A Prowling Thief caught in the Act—The Home of the Platypus—A "Duck-bill" brought to Bag, examined, skinned and eaten—Don discovers a "Native Porcupine," which proves another Puzzle—Unsuccessfully "Stalked" by a Black Fellow—Garrisoning the Sheep-yard.

DURING the next few months Harold found his time fully occupied by every variety of station work, which was, of course, similar in most respects to that at Wallaroo, but considerably harder, owing to the greater extent of the run and the small number of men on Burra-Burra. Though his permanent quarters were at the head station, he frequently passed several consecutive days at the out-stations, and thus

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became well acquainted with the run. Thrown now very much on his own resources, he missed the ready help always to be obtained from his friend, Bill Humphreys; for Mr. Gray (an equally willing mentor, when occasion offered,) was obliged to leave a great deal to Harold's unaided judgment.

Every preparation having been made for the lambing, Harold was entrusted with the management of a ewe flock at the three-mile hut, where "Long Tom" was told off as his assistant.

A few days after they had settled down, one of those incidents occurred which occasionally break the monotony of a shepherd's life, and afford materials for conversation in the huts for many a month.

"About time to turn in, isn't it?" said Harold, going to the door for a last look out. "It's a splendid night, and the sheep are all quiet. But, hark! What's that?"

The distant tramp of horses' feet could be heard, and presently a mounted figure appeared in the light from the open door, and called out in a tone which had the ring of command in

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it, "Can I stop the night here? I've brought a prisoner from the Barcoo, and am taking him down to Rockhampton."

A stalwart man, wearing the uniform of an officer of native police, dismounted, and four black troopers rode up immediately afterwards, one close on each side of, one before, and one behind a white man. The officer walked into the hut, giving orders to his men to bring in the prisoner, whose hands were securely fastened, and, after explaining that he must have two of his men to take turn at mounting guard through the night, directed the others to camp outside. They had brought their own rations, and were soon busy with supper, the black trooper, carbine in hand, watching the prisoner, while he conveyed the food with difficulty to his mouth.

In the meantime Harold took stock of the Bushranger. He was a tall, athletic young man of about five-and-twenty, almost beardless, with strongly marked eyebrows, a square forehead, and a grave but not unpleasant expression. For years past he had been engaged in

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bringing cattle overland from New South Wales to stock the Queensland pastures, consequently few men in Australia possessed so thorough a knowledge of the country from the Lachlan to the Flinders. Born in the back Bush, he had lived amidst scenes of excitement from his boyhood; and, fired by the accounts of Bushranging published in the Sydney papers, he had imagined himself a hero when, as his first venture, he pounced on a shepherd, leaving a small township with a dozen one-pound notes about him, the change out of a year's cheque. Since then, many a richer man had perforce answered to his imperative summons, "bail up," and within three years he had gathered together, under his leadership, a few kindred spirits, whose exploits had become the terror of many a mining district and the talk of the civilized world. Not very long before this, the band had made a grand *coup* by "sticking up" the mail coach, and relieving it of a considerable sum in specie and the one-pound notes negotiable everywhere; shooting the driver and a passenger besides. Shortly

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afterwards, a large force of police started on their track. Two of the gang were caught in a drinking-saloon, before they had time to offer any resistance; one had been drowned in a desperate attempt to swim the Bogan river at a dangerous rapid, in the hope of eluding his pursuers; another, on refusing to surrender, and using his revolver, was killed by a carbine shot while he was in the act of unsaddling at a shepherd's hut, whither the police had tracked him; and the last and cleverest of the gang had at length found himself in the hands of justice.

The officer, lying on his blankets after supper before the fire, and nodding his head in the direction of the prisoner, observed, "That fellow gave me more trouble than enough. I've been tracking him three hundred miles, and he always had the best of it, because he knew every crossing-place on the creeks, and whenever he met with a well-mounted man he would ride up to him, sling out his revolver, and order him to hand over the horse. So, he kept well ahead, in spite of all we could do. But the

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day before yesterday we nabbed him in a very curious way. The tracks told that his horse had gone lame, and we pushed on to try and catch him before he could get a fresh mount. Towards evening we saw the hoof-prints, where he had given his horse a drink at a water-hole, and a little further on the tracks became very difficult to follow across some stony ridges. I had just thought of camping for the night, as there was water handy, and as a mob of wild horses had passed over the track, which my black boys were trying to puzzle out, when one of them came back and reported that he was camped in a little patch of mulgah scrub, not a quarter of a mile away. The black boy, it appears, had heard two laughing jackasses, kicking up a row in the scrub, and thought there must be something to attract their notice. So he dismounted, put on the hobbles, and crept forward to have a look. There, sure enough, was our man, with his saddle and blankets on the ground, just going to light a fire. He little thought his time was so nearly up. We surrounded the scrub, and dashed in upon him

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all together. Taken so completely by surprise as he was, one shot from his revolver nevertheless crippled a black boy, and another, meant for me, went into my horse's neck as I rode him down. The black boys were on to him like cats, and had him tied up with their belts in no time."

"If it hadn't been for them —— birds, with their infernal blether, you and all your black devils would never have fetched me alive out of that scrub," * growled the prisoner.

The officer examined the fastenings on the man's wrists and ankles, told the trooper to keep strict watch over him, and rolled himself in his blankets, on the bunk which Harold insisted he should occupy.

Soon after daylight the police party mounted and rode off with the Bushranger between two black boys, each holding a rein of the bridle of the horse on which their prisoner was seated, to preclude the possibility of his making a dash for freedom.

Those two supremely important events of the year, the lambing and shearing, being

* This was narrated in my presence.—A. N.

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well over, Harold had leisure to apply himself for a few evenings to the task of compressing all the news of the past months into two long letters, one to Manor Farm and the other to Charlie Keene (not forgetting a dozen lines to Bill Humphreys), which would go on their way eastward in charge of the driver of a bullock dray, and be left at some station where the mail man called periodically, and thus eventually, he hoped, reach their destination. To Keene he expressed himself strongly inclined to enter into partnership with Mr. Gray, though he had not yet mentioned the matter to him, and requested that "the firm would inform him 'by return of post'—which might mean six months hence out in these wilds, you know," he added—on what terms business could be done to increase his capital, as Keene senior had suggested, by way of lien on the stock when he should have made his investment is so sound a property as he now knew the Burra-Burra station to be.

Quietly as everything had gone on through the lambing and shearing, trouble was never-

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theless now in store for the squatter. During the past fortnight Mr. Gray had been anxiously watching the attitude of the natives, who were assembling in the neighbourhood for one of their periodical fights. The stockmen brought in reports of quiet cattle becoming wild—a certain indication that they had been harried by the Blacks, who had speared more than one fat beast, and held high revel over its carcase. Strict orders, therefore, were given to the stockmen and shepherds to be cautious in their dealings with the aborigines, whose conduct proved them to be in an unusually excited and aggressive condition, particularly as ten sheep had recently been lost from the flock at the seven-mile hut under the charge of "Dandy," the most careful shepherd on the run.

"I don't like the look of this fresh lot of Barcoo Blacks about," remarked Mr. Gray to his head stockman. "I passed through that mob of cattle down the creek yesterday—that one with the ugly, crooked horned, white-faced bull—and they were off their regular feeding-

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ground, looking restless and scared. Just round them up to-morrow, and see whether any are speared or any of the calves missing."

"All right; and I'll bring up a few horses and put 'em into the paddock. We shall want some fresh 'uns for the mustering next week."

Harold had been performing the duties of ration-carrier lately, and on the morning following this conversation started with the pack-horse for "Dandy's" hut. The weather was splendid, and he rode through the fine forests in high spirits, keeping a sharp look-out for Blacks, who might be tempted by the plunder the pack-horse carried.

A Bushman's eye becomes wonderfully sharp at detecting anything unusual, however thick the Bush may be. Nothing, however, occurred until within a mile of the hut, when he noticed a strange object lying at some little distance from the track. Turning the horses towards it, he soon made out a dead sheep, recently killed and roughly hacked about, large pieces of the flesh having been carried off with the skin upon them. This was not the work of any

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white man. "One of Dandy's flock, I'll be bound," he thought; "those Blacks are up to mischief." Quickening the pace after this incident, he could not help remarking the uneasiness of the horses, whose ears kept twitching nervously, as if they felt themselves in the presence of some suspected danger.

As he turned the corner of the small stockyard, the pack-horse shied violently, almost dragging him out of the saddle, while the little grey mare he was riding turned sharp round and tried to bolt. Almost under the horses' feet lay the half-stripped and terribly mutilated body of poor Dandy, and a small flock of crows rose from it with their harsh cry, and perched upon the fence.

The shock nearly paralyzed him, but the plunging of the horses occupied all his attention for the next few moments. Dismounting, he tied them to the fence, and approached the corpse. Only a week since, he had heard the old shepherd's cheery welcome as he rode up to the hut—and now, before him lay his dead body, stripped to the waist, pierced with spear-

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"DANDY" KILLED BY THE BLACKS. [Vol. ii. p. 145.

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wounds, and the skull battered in. There could be no doubt of the authors of this. A few dead sheep lay in the yard and near the water-hole further on. The rest were gone; no sign of living thing about the place except the ghastly attendants of the dead, which sat croaking on the fence, impatient at their sudden disturbance. He entered the hut; everything portable had been carried off. It seemed as though the wretched deed had been done early that morning or the night before. Most probably the man had been struck down, as he was yarding his sheep, by the spears of Blacks in ambush; for, had he had time to use his gun, he might have beaten them off. Had he, too, possessed a trusty dog, he would never have been thus taken by surprise.

There was no time to lose. Harold dragged the body into the hut, fastened the door to keep out the dingoes and crows, mounted, and rode off to the cattle-men's huts with all speed. The men were out, but nothing was wrong there. It was much easier to surprise a lonely shepherd than a couple of active young stockmen with

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their dogs about the yard, and no attempt had been made. Still, they must be warned, and Mr. Gray would want to see them next day, in case of danger at the head station. So, taking a leaf from the little pocket-book which he always carried, he wrote "Found Dandy killed by Blacks. Come in to-night. No Blacks along the creek road when I came this morning," and stuck it over the fire-place. Depositing the rations on the shelf, he turned the pack-horse loose to find his way home by himself, and, after an hour's hard galloping, pulled up at the slip-rails of the Burra-Burra enclosure.

It was already dark, and the barking of the dogs brought out Mr. Gray, who, as he let down the last rail, exclaimed, "What's wrong, Bertram? Where's the pack-horse?"

"Dandy's murdered by the Blacks, and all the sheep are gone," Harold answered, almost before the question was finished.

"Dandy?—murdered?—good heavens! Did you see the stockmen?"

"No; but the Blacks had not been there, and I left a note for them to come in to-night."

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A rapid sketch from Harold of what he had seen affected Mr. Gray deeply.

"If these black devils are not hunted down, they will be killing every man on the run now," he said, with unwonted anger; then, after a pause, "Can you do a ride of forty miles to-night? There will be a good moon later on."

"Yes," replied Harold promptly.

"Then clap your saddle on 'Ironbark,' he's in the stable, and I'll give you a note to take over to Tulloch's. You know most of the way. Cross the river at the five-mile ford, and strike straight across the plain for the sandy flats. On the other side of the ridge beyond, you come to a good dray-track. Follow that to the south for an hour, and it will bring you to the huts and yards of Tulloch's mustering station. Rouse the men up, and get them to show you the way to the head station, and give the master my note."

Within ten minutes Harold had swallowed a mouthful of damper and beef and was in the saddle, on the powerful stock-horse which Mr. Gray reserved for his own use.

"Don't spare the horse," said Mr. Gray,

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handing him the letter, "he ought to do it in little over five hours with your weight. I rode him eighty miles once, right off. Wait, and come over with Tulloch's men to-morrow; we shall want you. Good night."

Before Mr. Gray had fairly let down the last slip-rail "Ironbark" dashed out of the enclosure, pulling his rider almost over the pommel.

"Steady now, steady," as he cleared the creek in his stride, and got on to the level plain.

"What a splendid beast!" thought Harold. "I'll let him go over the next three miles of flat." And the horse raced as he liked for ten minutes.

Now for the ford on the Barcoo river. The horse had passed it scores of times, and knew it well. Into the water he plunged, and swam steadily across, without moving his rider in the saddle, mounted the opposite bank, shook himself, and sped on his way. Three hours' hard riding over rough ridges and deep, sandy, gullies now lay before them. Soaked to the armpits, Harold, nevertheless, did not feel cold during the violent exertion of urging the willing horse over the broken country.

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The moon rose behind him, making a long distorted shadow of man and horse bound wildly over the irregular surface far away in front. The light cast on the landscape enabled him now to trace the bold outlines of the heavily wooded Burra ranges to the right, while for many miles on his left stretched a vast network of swamps, in which he must not get entangled if his journey was to be finished that night. Between these two dangers he must keep a course due west, the direction in which the station lay. To make sure of his bearings, he pulled up every few miles, looked at his compass, noted the altered position of the moon, and rode on with some assurance that at least he could not be very far out in his reckoning. Five hours of uncertainty and anxiety; and what if, after all, he should miss the way! Then the Blacks might attack the head station, burn it to the ground, and massacre every one before assistance could arrive. The thought of so terrible a calamity stimulated him to the utmost to recall to memory every indication which might help to guide him—the whole country presenting so uniform an aspect

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under the moonlight, which added to the difficulty of recognizing prominent landmarks.

Throughout the journey he kept an eager watch on the darkly looming outline of the range on the right hand, and it was with great satisfaction that he saw the hills gradually sinking away to the level country at the "gap" in which Tulloch had placed his cattle-station.

A sudden plunge up to the girths into a patch of sand-bog, and it seemed all over with both man and horse; but the powerful animal struggled out of the treacherous soil by an effort which taxed its whole strength.

Now the ground becomes firmer. There lies a tree, lately felled, as he can see by the moon shining on its smooth white butt, and a little further something like a track. He dismounts and examines it. Yes, there are deep wheel-ruts, and surely he is now reaching his destination. This must be the dray-road to the station. Picking it out carefully in the fitful gleams of light through the forest, and following it steadily some miles to the southward, he breaks into a clearing where the yards and huts stand out

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sharply in the moonlight. The smothered bark of a dog proclaims his approach.

He knocks at a door, which is presently opened by a drowsy man with the question "What's up?"

"Can you show me the way to Tulloch's head station?" asked Harold.

"Of coorse I *can*; but why the bloomin' —— *should* I?"

"I've ridden over from Burra-Burra with an important letter for him."

"Oh, that's it—come in, then."

The stockman lighted the fat-lamp, and put on his boots while Harold told him about the murder.

"Shocking, ain't it, now?" he observed. "I'll catch the horse in the little yard, what I tails the calves with."

Half an hour's gallop brought them to the house. Harold delivered the letter, and gladly threw himself down in his wet clothes before a fire to snatch two or three hours' sleep, after a ride of some seventy miles since he started with the rations the previous morning.

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Harold had scarcely left Burra-Burra, when the stockmen came in, with "Jack," the native whom Mr. Gray had brought up with him from the Murray district two years before—one of the most useful hands on the run—and a consultation was held on the situation.

Jack had been out with the cattle during the day at the further end of the run, and had observed numerous tracks of sheep where none should have been. His opinion was now of great importance. "Me b'leeve plenty bad black fellow sit down likey Boola water-holes."

These two small lagoons were a favourite camping ground, about ten miles beyond Dandy's hut, and the most probable locality of the camp which now sheltered the murderers. It was decided, then, to make for the hut early in the morning, bury the body, wait there for the reinforcements Harold was to bring, and start in the evening for the camp, in order to surprise the Blacks at daylight before they had time to prepare for a defence which might cost the small attacking party too dear.

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In the ordinary course of things it was the squatter's duty to summon the black troopers to his aid; but the great distance of the nearest barracks and the urgency of the occasion put this out of the question. Two or three days' delay would certainly bring the savages down in force on the head station, and perhaps lead to the extermination of all the white men on the run.

The party arrived at Mr. Gray's early in the afternoon, changed horses for the fresh mounts got ready for them, and mustered in the evening at Dandy's hut. The horses were hobbled out, and all sat down to a welcome meal of salt beef, damper, and tea; after which they chatted and smoked or dozed away the time till midnight.

The party—twelve altogether—could not be considered a strong one for the work before them. Their weapons were short double-barrelled guns carrying ball; with two Enfield rifles and Mr. Gray's and Harold's revolvers among them. The Blacks were certainly numerous—probably at least two hundred—

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and extreme caution would be necessary in approaching them.

Mr. Gray had thought it safe enough to leave two well-armed men at the head station, which was not likely to be attacked in any force, since the Blacks had plenty of mutton at the camp, and would be fully occupied in feasting and dancing.

Dandy's grave having been dug during the afternoon at the foot of a gigantic gum tree, the mangled body was wrapped in a blanket, and gently laid in the earth, Mr. Gray speaking, as well as he could recollect the words, a few sentences from the Burial Service over the lifeless clay which so recently had been a vigorous man. On this colossal living monument—with every prospect of lasting for centuries—was cut the simple record of the shepherd's fate. "Dandy" (no one knew his real name) "murdered by the Blacks," followed by the date. The woodman, it was hoped, would spare that tree so long as one stroke remained of the inscription to mark the last resting-place of this poor victim to colonization.

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Soon after midnight the whole party were in the saddle. Mr. Gray explained the plan of operations. Murray Jack was to lead on to the Boola water-holes—night or day was the same to him—and when within half a mile of the camp, strip himself, go forward to reconnoitre, and decide on the best place to make the attack. The approach must be conducted with the utmost silence and caution. A volley was to be delivered into the camp at a given signal. Reloading, the party would pick off as many Blacks as possible from behind the trees before they had time to take shelter in the Bush, and, when the demoralization of the natives was complete, an attempt would be made to recover some of the sheep taken from Dandy's yard, if any remained.

The Australian natives, being full of superstition, are disinclined to move about at night. They have scarcely any power of organization for protection, and set no scouts to guard against surprise. As long as the sheep lasted, every one would eat until he could scarcely move; but, the supply being exhausted, they

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would recollect that the white man's store contained abundance of luxuries, and an attack on the head station would be the most probable consequence. Impunity for the murder of a shepherd would assuredly encourage them to further acts of violence.

Before seven o'clock in the morning there would be little light. Though the distance to be traversed was not more than ten or twelve miles, it would be necessary to be in the neighbourhood early, to give Jack time to reconnoitre. The little party rode slowly onwards in silence over the rough crests of the ridges; emerging here and there into open, fern-covered glades, flanked by straight grey stems of gum-trees looking ghostly in the moonlight, and anon through broad stretches of forest, under a leafy canopy through which the moon cast fitful patches of light upon the ground. Overhead the opossum uttered his harsh kurr-r-r-r-r as he scurried to a place of safety; and the unearthly cry of the great night-jar—"mo-poke, mo-poke, mo-poke"—rang out upon the calm night air now and again with startling effect.

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Groves of wattles exuded a sweet scent from their little golden balls of bloom, and showered their pollen on the travellers as they brushed through the trees, while legions of fire-flies danced along the front of the black-green scrubs. It was indeed a superb night, in strange contrast with the stern business those horsemen were bent upon.

They had reached the crest of a hill about a mile from the water-holes, when a halt was called, and Mr. Gray sent the Murray native up a tree to ascertain whether any fires were in sight. He could make out nothing with certainty, but fancied he caught the glimmer of a light in the distance once or twice. After all, the native might be wrong in his confident belief in the situation of the camp. However, stripping himself of all his clothing except his belt and ammunition-pouch, and taking his gun, Jack went forward to reconnoitre. Should the Blacks be encamped where he suspected, he was to choose a point of attack under the best cover, and lead the party to it. He glided away into the Bush without cracking a twig,

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and nothing now remained but to wait his return.

The task was one of considerable danger, and the courage and self-reliance necessary to carry it out would be found in very few natives. But Jack belonged to one of the most warlike tribes in the country, and was one of those rare instances of fidelity and attachment to the white man which the Australian savage has occasionally exhibited. Should he find himself suddenly among the Blacks, his nakedness would secure him from immediate notice, and he was well enough armed to make good his retreat in the event of his object being discovered. The whole party was held in readiness to gallop forward at the sound of a shot, which would inform them that the surprise had failed, and make the most of an open attack.

Anxious minutes pass slowly. Half an hour had gone. Already the wind was veering round to the east, and the leaves waving in the breeze which heralds sunrise. The sky overhead was becoming grey. Day birds were waking; the "jackass" had saluted the silent

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men with his derisive chuckle, and the air smelt of the morning. In little more than half an hour the sun would be up, the Blacks would observe the approaching party, desert the camp, and scatter in every direction through the Bush, where pursuit would be hopeless.

The failure of the plan seemed imminent, when Jack suddenly reappeared with full information. Near the smallest of the lagoons were a number of bark "gunyahs," and within easy distance a patch of dense scrub, affording good cover. Not a single native was to be seen moving; but the numerous streaks of smoke rising from the fires and the spears resting against the huts indicated to Jack's experienced eye "Plenty, plenty black fellow." By heading round the lagoon, twenty minutes' ride would bring the party to the scrub, where the horses would be left in charge of two men, the remainder going forward to the attack.

"Now, my lads," said Mr. Gray, "you know what you have to do. I lead, on the right. When we get within range my revolver will give you the signal. Pick your man, each of

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you, and drop him. Keep covered as much as you can. Don't speak a word until I fire, and do your best to avoid hitting the women and children."

On reaching the scrub, within two or three hundred yards of the first "gunyahs," the party quietly dismounted, hobbled the horses, and secured them by their head-stalls to the trees. Here they would be safe, for the attack would be delivered between them and the camp, and there was no chance of the Blacks doubling round to the rear. The men formed quickly into line, with orders not to lose sight of their right and left hand supporters.

Day was fast breaking. A black fellow might have been seen in open ground at a distance of a hundred yards, had any been about. Stealthily they crept on through the scrub, which soon became thinner, and opened out into a belt of ferns, waist high. Just beyond this appeared lines of smoke rising from the outlying shelters, where the unsuspecting Blacks rested, while no warning was given even by their mangy dogs, glutted with

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food, and sleeping heavily among the women and children in the hot, stifling "gunyahs."

Cautiously, onward still, eagerly listening for the signal, which seemed as though it would never come, until they might have dashed into the midst of the camp at a short run.

But Mr. Gray was a good leader. His men, nervous and anxious, needed a moment's breathing time. The Blacks had no suspicion of danger; all unconscious that ten pairs of muzzles were looking at them out of the ferns, not fifty yards away.

At last, on the right, rang out the sharp crack of the revolver. In an instant the camp was alive with men, springing from the "gunyahs" and grasping their spears. To pick any particular mark was almost impossible. But the volley was delivered with destructive effect; and, before the smoke had cleared and the guns were again loaded, scarcely a black fellow was in sight. A score of spears and boomerangs came whizzing into the ferns.

"Give them another volley there among those ti-trees," shouted Mr. Gray; and once

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more the leaden messengers sped after the flying foe. Even now an advance into the open ground would have been dangerous, for, no doubt, many of the natives lurked behind the trees, whence a well-aimed spear might be thrown with deadly effect.

Word was passed down the line to open out, and, still keeping in cover, to work round to the left of the lagoon. Here for a few minutes a sharp encounter took place with a determined knot of Blacks, whose agility in slipping from tree to tree was marvellous.

Harold himself had a narrow escape from a spear, and immediately afterwards shot down a native who was rushing on Mr. Gray from behind. Some more successful shots having been made, the party advanced into the camp from the further side, and found it now cleared of fighting men and completely in possession of the invaders.

It was a stronger camp than they had at first supposed, containing at least two hundred men. Numbers of charred and half-eaten sheep lay about the fires. The only tenants of the

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"gunyahs" now were a few old "gins," and some infants, thrown hastily aside by their mothers. The aged crones cowered under their bark shelters, while the infants crawled about and stared curiously at the white men. The dead needed no attention, and the wounded received the most humane treatment that could be given—speedy release from their sufferings—better than to lie there and starve, for their fellows would go their way, leaving the helpless behind as so much useless lumber. The bodies and weapons were gathered together, with quantities of dry wood and bark heaped over them, and in a few minutes the dead were hidden under such a pyramid of flame as would rapidly obliterate all traces of that morning's grim work.

A faint "coo-ee" sounded near at hand.

"That's Jack's voice, surely," said Mr. Gray.

The poor fellow, badly wounded, had crawled up until within hearing. Mr. Gray was soon busy staunching a terrible spear-thrust in his thigh, while Harold did his best with a hand-

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kerchief and two strips of ti-tree bark to bind up his left arm—evidently broken between the elbow and shoulder. After a good dose of whiskey from Mr. Gray's flask, he was able to tell how it happened. He had got out of the line while hunting down a black fellow in his own fashion, when suddenly another sprang from the ground among the ferns and speared him, at the same moment striking him a terrific blow on the arm with his "waddy," felling him to the earth. Fortunately Jack retained consciousness for an instant, swung the muzzle of his gun towards his assailant, and fired without knowing anything of the result. Recovering his senses, he found a huge black fellow lying dead across him. Extricating himself with great pain and difficulty, he had dragged himself to the place where his cry for help had been heard. Mr. Gray, ready in every emergency of Bush life, directed a stretcher to be made of two stout poles, with shorter pieces bound across them, and fixed with strips of leather cut from Jack's belt. This rough framework, on which were laid a couple of coats covered with ferns,

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proved a serviceable means of carrying the sufferer.

Jack had made a remark about the black fellow having something shiny hanging on to his neck, which decided Mr. Gray to look for the body. Under the wounded man's directions it was soon found, lying face downwards in a pool of blood, grasping the ferns, and close beside it Jack's gun. Mr. Gray turned it over, and, as it rolled on its back, every eye instantly recognized an article belonging to the murdered shepherd. Suspended to the neck by a strip of kangaroo hide was the little common round looking-glass in which the old man used to shave himself and arrange his grizzled locks, with that attention to personal appearance—so rare in the Bush—which had earned him the familiar nickname "Dandy."

Until now there was not one of the party who might not have felt some misgivings as to the justice of the severe retribution inflicted upon the natives. But here was indisputable proof that the perpetrators of the crime belonged to this camp. This was evidently the leader,

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decked out in the most attractive portion of the spoil appropriated to himself. A fine man he was, probably twelve stone in weight. Jack's bullet had torn through the lower part of his chest and gone out under his shoulder-blade. It would have killed a bull.

Harold took the looking-glass from the corpse, intending to preserve it as a memento.

One of the men now came up and reported that he had found about fifty sheep, penned in a rough enclosure of logs and boughs, by the side of the lagoon. Mr. Gray ordered Jack to be carried to the place where the horses were waiting, and went off to bring up the sheep—no easy matter, for they were wild with terror.

The horses were unhobbled, and the whole party formed in line behind the sheep, and drove them to the bend of a small creek, where they camped for an hour to have a bite of damper and beef, the day's rations which every man had brought with him. Thence the cavalcade moved slowly forward to Dandy's hut, carrying the wounded man by relays.

Much to Mr. Gray's delight, some three

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hundred of the sheep had found their way back to their yard—the miserable remnant, as it was, of a once fine flock.

In spite of every care, Jack gradually sank, dying at evening from loss of blood. The faithful black fellow was buried next morning by the side of old Dandy, and every one felt that those two graves justified the stern lesson which had been taught the natives that day at the Boola lagoons. The Blacks were never again seen in any large numbers on the run, and the few who occasionally hung about the head station for years afterwards spoke shudderingly of the place as "Humpie bong"—the house of death.

Not many weeks elapsed ere the gloom and distrust following this event began to diminish. Even Mrs. Gray's fear for the safety of the children was passing off, and they were allowed to wander a reasonable distance from home, as heretofore. After supper, one evening, Harold asked the squatter what he thought of doing with Dandy's run. It seemed a pity to leave such a rich piece of country unoccupied.

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"So it is; but I hardly like to ask any of the men to take a flock out there after what's happened; though I think, with the caution they had, it's pretty safe from the Blacks now."

"What do you say, then, to my trying it for a spell?" asked Harold. "Now that the hot weather is on, and the grass near home is getting scorched, and two of the yards are so badly crowded, you know, I could run fourteen or fifteen hundred sheep out there till the spring, and perhaps you would pick up a shepherd for them in the meantime."

"I am really much obliged to you, Bertram," said Mr. Gray cordially; "but you must think it over again. Four or five months out there wouldn't be very lively for any one; so don't be in a hurry."

"There's no need to consider it, so far as I am concerned," he rejoined. "I shall be all right with Don for my chum, and, as to work, he's as good as a couple of men"—stroking the head of the colley, who had become a privileged inmate of the house and a mighty favourite with the children.

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"If you're bent on it, then, we'll look round at Scotty's and Long Tom's to-morrow, and make a draft from their flocks—and, let's see—we might bunch up a couple of hundred young ewes with the wethers."

So it was arranged. The yard at the seven-mile hut was repaired and strengthened; the roof of the hut made waterproof; and, within a week, Harold took possession, Mr. Gray counting a mixed flock of thirteen hundred through the gate of the yard.

"Good-bye, and good luck to you," he said, shaking hands; "and, mind, if you see any signs of Blacks about, come in to the head station at once, and let the sheep go to the devil—if they must. I don't want another man murdered on my run. And, if you need anything out of the store to make you comfortable, just send in word by the ration-carrier."

The first few nights in the hut were anything but pleasant. At the slightest movement of the sheep in the yard, Harold would slip out with his hand on Don's collar, and listen, trusting, however, more to the acute senses

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of the dog than to his own, confident in the colley's ability to distinguish between the movements of a human being and those of any animal. One morning—the faintest glimmer of light showing through the chinks in the slab walls of the hut—he was startled from sleep by that dreaded sound, like distant thunder, the flock rushing round in the yard. Barefooted, and gun in hand, he opened the door quietly. The dog darted past him round one side of the inclosure, while he ran to the opposite corner just in time to see the indistinct form of a dingo making off. A long shot with a wire cartridge crippled the marauder, and Don's angry voice soon told that a conflict was going on. Harold, hurrying up, saw the last desperate struggle of the wild dog to free itself from the deadly grip the colley had on its throat; and his master's encouraging, "Give it him, Don; shake him, good dog; worry him, then," stimulated the colley to tear away more savagely at the throat of his foe, who had inflicted so serious a bite on Don's shoulder that he went lame for some days after-

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wards. Harold took the skin off the dingo and hung it up in his hut as a trophy, and poisoned the body with strychnine for the benefit of the eagle hawks and crows, which were too cautious to come within reach of his gun.

In spite of the absence of companionship, he enjoyed the life at the seven-mile hut thoroughly, when the flock, at first wild and needing constant watching on their new run, settled down and left him leisure to use his gun in making a collection of skins of animals, birds, and snakes, and to secure many of the beautiful butterflies and moths, strange beetles, and gigantic ants, which he had never had time to notice when more actively engaged.

Could any of his old friends in England have seen him now, they would not have recognized the identity of the curiously attired figure which marched out every morning after the flock. Blucher boots and much worn moleskin trousers covered his lower man; a faded scarlet Crimean shirt sufficed for the upper half; and a cabbage-tree hat broken down at the brim kept the sun from his head. Over one shoulder was slung

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a sheep-skin satchel, containing the midday meal, together with a selection of pins, collecting materials, and ammunition, while from the other hung the binocular; the trusty double-barrelled gun lying in the hollow of his left arm. As the shadows of the gum-trees lengthened out, the bleating flock slowly defiled into the yard under Don's superintendence, whilst his master went into the hut to unpin insects from his hat, lay out birds for skinning, and set the "billy" on the fire. With these occupations to employ his days and evenings, he never felt time hang heavily on his hands, nor even knew how the hours passed, except by a rough estimate from the sun, moon, or stars. During the day, he selected an open space, set a short stick upright in the ground and laid another at its foot pointing south, in accordance with the needle of his compass. When the shadow of the upright stick passed to the south over the recumbent stick, this primitive sun-dial indicated approximately the hour of noon. At night, he was dependent on the position in the heavens of the Southern

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Cross, a good view of which could be obtained from the door of his hut, though he seldom felt tempted to burn the "midnight oil," in the shape of the miserable fat lamp, into the small hours of the morning. The daily tramp of eight or ten miles behind a strong flock, which spread out over half a square mile of forest land, and in the fierce heat of the Australian summer, disposes the shepherd to rest at the termination of his day's work, especially with a temperature of 110° in his hut.

Nevertheless, his "library"—a small edition of Milton's poems, an odd volume of Shakspeare's plays, and the Oxford pocket edition of Horace—frequently beguiled him into another world; and favourite passages, read aloud to no other auditor than Don, revived pleasant thoughts of old Rugby, from which he felt separated by infinite space.

The little stream near the hut, whence he drew his water, meandered away a mile or so, until it joined a large creek whose course wound through a series of richly grassed flats. On his way home one evening, he took the flock

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to this fine pasture, and let them feed, while he explored the water in the hope of seeing a platypus—the most timid and wary animal in Australia. The creek threw out a horseshoe-shaped backwater for half a mile, which curved round, and in wet weather joined the main stream. Into this *cul de sac* he drove the flock, where it would be under observation, and prepared to watch for his quarry.

A more beautiful spot it would have been hard to find in the length and breadth of Queensland. The axe of the woodman had never yet sounded its discordant note in this nursery of black swans, duck, teal, and snipe, and sanctuary of the platypus. The water varied from twenty to fifty yards in breadth, and was certainly deep in the middle, where no weeds raised their heads to the surface. From the masses of drift timber which here and there formed islands of decaying wood, rose pyramids of luxuriant vegetation, rendered impenetrable to all but the wattle birds by a dense network of parasitic plants. Both banks were lined by a rampant growth of graceful flags and

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weeds, which afforded shelter to many kinds of water-fowl, and had become the fountain of life to a world of small aquatic creatures engaged in destroying each other and fattening themselves for their winged enemies.

Harold's chief concern was to approach without alarming a single inhabitant of this secluded world. Wild animals, as he knew, were never disturbed by the sight of sheep, but quickly detected any object differing so greatly from their accustomed surroundings as a white face peering out from a background of greenery. Laying down his hat, he gathered a bunch of ferns, twisted them together by the stems, and eveloped his head in the plume of fronds. Then, signing to Don to crouch behind, he crawled forward to the bank, on hands and knees, quietly parted the vegetation, and peeped out upon a scene of enchanting beauty. Before him lay the unruffled sheet of water, glowing golden with the light of the slanting sun-rays on open spaces, but deepening into dark shadows under the banks beneath the tangled vegetation, which hung down from the trees

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and dipped into the fringe of reeds and flags—the dark green boundary between land and water. The fervid Australian sun, sinking towards the horizon, threw a lace-like patchwork of light and shade upon the placid surface, through acacias and wattles loaded with bloom and redolent of perfume diffused far and wide in the evening air even now becoming heavy with dew.

Some little distance to the right, a giant of the forest, cast down by the wind a lifetime ago, nearly bridged the water from bank to bank, its half-submerged trunk covered with soft, deep mosses, and its withered arms bearing aloft a profusion of creeping plants bespangled here and there with starry white flowers. In a shallow, some distance further down, so straight and motionless, it might be a bunch of reeds, stands the figure of a steel-blue heron on one leg, pensively watching the water as if he were admiring his own reflection in it, but his lance-like bill is thrust suddenly down, and with a jerk of his head backwards some struggling creature is engulfed in the

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insatiable maw. A flash of blue and silver passes close to Harold's face, and his eye follows its level flight to a bare twig overhanging the water.

What a brilliant feathered gem is this kingfisher, perched on his point of vantage, his head inclined to one side, surveying the pool beneath! Thus motionless he sits, while the sight wearies with watching, but anon straight from the branch like a cast javelin shoots the silver and blue gem into the water, reappears with a beetle or small fish between his mandibles, and returning to the twig beats the life out of the captive by a few smart blows, and swallows it, or skims away to the nest under the bank, where the young brood expects the delicious morsel. In and out among the stems of the flags glide tiny brown ducklings in chase of insects, diving hither and thither in obedience to their inherited instincts, though the shell has been but a few hours off their backs. Over the placid surface skim a score of swallows, hawking at the myriad insects which had their birth in the prolific water, and,

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as they flit past the observer, he hears the sharp snap of the mandibles on a mosquito or a moth. Under the steep bank on which he lay, whence he could see in some places to the bottom, patches of bright green mossy weed showed shoals of small fish—the young fry of the season—moving slowly in serried ranks with gently waving tails.

Along the opposite bank, a cluster of the fleshy, oval leaves of Leichhardt's lily—each fifteen or twenty inches in diameter—spread over the surface, and above them the pink, bell-shaped, waxen flowers bent in graceful curves from their long stalks. Here a blue, scarlet-billed porphyrio, a gigantic moorhen, rose mysteriously from beneath the lilies, and stepping upon the leaves, which scarcely bent under its weight, walked about, pausing at intervals in a thoughtful attitude, while searching for his evening meal of water snails.

Absorbed in contemplation of this scene during the past half-hour, Harold now felt the effect of his cramped position, but being most anxious to make no movement likely to prevent

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a platypus from showing itself, he was content with taking a rest on the other elbow, and bringing his gun within full range of the water. Don, seeing no prospect of any result of his master's proceedings, had gone off to look after the sheep.

The lengthened shadows now warned him that scarcely half an hour of daylight remained. Should he yet have a chance? If not, he was determined to watch in this lovely spot evening after evening until he attained his object.

What was that strong boil of the water just now, near the lilies, like the rise of a salmon to a fly? The ripples come over to his side, and gradually die away. There it is again; and a strangely shaped animal crawls over the leaves, dives in and out among them with the easy gliding motion of an otter, and disappears. The distance was too great for a certain shot. He waits, therefore, in breathless anticipation, bringing the stock of the gun nearer his cheek, with the muzzles covering the bed of lilies.

Some minutes pass; yet nothing stirs the

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water, except a tiny dimple from a rising bubble; when, suddenly, the surface breaks into a turmoil, fifteen yards from the bank, and two long brown bodies are seen rolling over and over, playing or fighting, performing the most graceful evolutions, showing beaver-like tails, and duck-like heads, and at times almost springing out of the water in their vigorous gambols. But they are getting out of shot while he pauses, involuntarily, in astonishment at this unexpected display. The hoarse roar of the gun breaks the stillness of the scene. He is stripped in a few moments, and eagerly swimming round the spot where the charge rippled along the water, where he felt certain he had glimpsed something struggling immediately afterwards. Don, hearing the report, hurries up, and the two hunt systematically in all directions; but to no purpose. Is he, then, after all, to be disappointed? No; Don, swimming along the bank, sees a dusky object crawling through the reeds, makes a dash, and secures it before it can regain the deep water; and Harold soon stands on the

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bank, triumphantly holding his first platypus in his hand.

Notwithstanding a broken leg and other injuries, the slippery, smooth-haired creature put forth all its strength, scratching Harold's hands with its sharp nails in its efforts to escape, and giving him much trouble to control its struggles which, however, came to an end as soon as he pressed a stout pin through the back of its skull.

Supper over, he laid out his prize for skinning. Truly, the animal was well named the "duck-billed, broad-footed puzzle!" How it must have astonished the first white man who ever handled one! The body measured eighteen inches from the tip of the bill to the end of the tail, as he ascertained from the inch notches which he had filed along the back of his belt-knife, and was covered with a short, stiff brown fur, very similar in texture to that of a mole, while its large, broad tail was flattened beneath. The horny "bill," about two and three-quarter inches long, broader and flatter than that of a duck, had the nostrils close to the tip, and

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where it joined the head, was surrounded by a wide membrane, projecting in front of the small eyes and under the chin, with a narrow fringe along the edges of the mandibles. The short fore-legs were furnished with five toes, ending in long, spatula-shaped nails, and webbed; the membrane extending a quarter of an inch beyond the nails. Great swimming power must be given by these broad, webbed feet, which were as large as the palm of a man's hand. The hind-legs, similarly webbed, but with the five nails extending beyond the membrane, carried slightly curved spurs, about as large as those of a pheasant, evidently attached to the bone, and exceedingly sharp.

After a long survey of the exterior of this strange animal, Harold applied himself to the tedious task of getting off the skin; and, on coming to the head, he was surprised to find the ear a simple oval opening, like that of a bird, the eye furnished with a membrane for drawing over the eye-ball, like that possessed by a duck, and the skull very similar to a bird's. He naturally looked for teeth, but

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found only a long, narrow, flattened, horny plate along the inside of each mandible, becoming broader where the grinders should be.

Being very curious to know how platypus tasted, he baked the fore-quarters on the embers. It turned out to be excellent—quite as good as bandicoot, though not so tender—and when he was separating the bones of the chest, he was struck by their resemblance to the same bones in a bird.

By good luck, a day or two afterwards, he came in for another valuable addition to his collection. Near a white ants' nest, Don discovered and gave chase to a small animal which rolled itself into a ball. The dog began dancing round it in a ludicrous fashion, snapping at without touching it, and recoiling from it when he tried to scratch it with his paws. Harold concluded at once that this prickly ball must be the much-talked-of "porcupine," which looked like a large hedgehog. He turned it over repeatedly with his foot; still it remained coiled up. Then he called Don behind him and watched it. The ball presently cautiously unrolled itself,

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crawled some distance, and set to work digging in the soil with all its four powerful legs, armed with strong claws. The beast disappeared so rapidly that Harold picked up a stick and rooted it out, lest he should lose it altogether, when it again rolled itself up. He raised it carefully in both hands and let it fall upon the ground, but it would not open until he turned it over, and, finding a small space between the spines, drove his long knife through into its body. When stretched out dead it proved even a greater puzzle than the platypus. About the size of a barn-door fowl, with the beak of a curlew, the whole upper surface of the body was closely set with quills, exactly like those of the porcupine in shape and colour, the longest between three and four inches, and sharp as needles, intermixed with long, coarse hairs.

Cramming the queer creature with some difficulty into his satchel, he waited until he reached the hut to examine it more closely. The curlew-like beak turned out to be simply a closed tube with a small opening at the tip, whence protruded the end of a slimy, lizard-like

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tongue, which he pulled out six or seven inches, when it slipped from his fingers and flew back into the tube like a released spring. The small nostrils were placed near the tip of this singular tube, which reminded him of nothing so much as the long snout of a South-American ant-eater. The spurs on the hind-feet were similar to those of his platypus; but, taken altogether, he thought this the more extraordinary *lusus naturæ* of the two. After an hour's work, and much pricking of his fingers with the spines, he managed to worry the skin off, and hung it on the little frame which he had constructed up the capacious chimney to become gradually smoke-dried—this being the most convenient rough-and-ready means of protecting his specimens from the attacks of flies.

The unpleasant smell of the flesh deterred him from making any culinary experiments in this instance, but he could not let the opportunity slip of exploring the internal construction of the beast. He therefore sat up late for the purpose of boiling the carcase to rags in his hang-pot and separating the bones. The strong

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bones starting from the front of the blade-bones and joining the breast-bone were there, and also the united collar-bones, just as they are found in the common fowl and all other birds. On picking to pieces the lower limbs and examining the bony girdle which binds the hip-bones together, he could scarcely believe his eyes. Attached to the front of the arch were two splint-like bones, very similar to those he had noticed supporting the pouches of the kangaroos and opossums, but never in any other animals. Unable to give himself a satisfactory explanation of these various incongruities, he packed away the parts of this composite structure in an old pickle-jar, to wait until a chance offered of sending them home to England, together with other curiosities of nature.

Month after month slipped away so fast, that when Mrs. Gray sent him a slice of the family Christmas pudding, to vary the everlasting salt beef and damper, he wondered whether he had really been so long at the hut. With the pudding came a still more welcome copy of the *Field*, nearly a year old, dated December 23rd,

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and a letter from Manor Farm. The skating reports—the past winter had been very severe—almost made him feel cool when he glanced at his thermometer hanging inside the hut (105° long after sunset), and thought of his old friends coming home, after shooting, across those bleak Yorkshire moors in the face of one of the hard easterly gales and snowstorms which he remembered so well. The "Athletics" column of the *Field*, too, were always eagerly scanned. Here he would occasionally see the name of some old schoolfellow in the front rank of competitors on the running track; in the racket- court at the Oval; playing brilliant cricket for his county eleven at Lord's; kicking the winning goal, after a prolonged struggle with Eton; pulling stroke in his college eight; or giving an account before the Royal Geographical Society of his explorations in Somali Land; or a yachting cruise in the South Pacific, among those "Summer isles of Eden, circled by the sapphire sea."

Yet he scarcely envied his old acquaintances these triumphs and distinctions. They, at all

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events, did not know the calm pleasures of pastoral life in the Australian Bush; and might not some of his own "Sketches at the Antipodes," or "Notes on Sheep Farming," one day see the light in that gigantic periodical which gathers into its pages all that is best of sport, natural history, and travel from the remotest parts of the world?

January the 15th was a day, *creta meliore notanda* in the diary which Harold kept regularly whenever circumstances permitted. Not a drop of rain had fallen since the first week in December, during a slight thunderstorm. The little stream near the hut had dwindled to a few stagnant pools, at which hundreds of wallabies came to drink every night. The grass on the high lands crackled under foot like dead bean-stalks, and even along the Tumboot Creek, where the porous soil kept it moist, the rank vegetation, which stood breast-high when he first came to the hut, now drooped in wilted bunches, yellow down to the roots. Here he brought the flock to browse on the scattered blades of sweet grass, growing under

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the shade of the wattles, and to give them a drink at the creek. Having brought them out earlier than usual, to afford them an opportunity of filling their stomachs before the sun reached its hottest, he was glad to see some of them lie down and begin to chew the cud, knowing that the whole flock (not a third of which were within his view) would soon follow the example and take their midday siesta.

The intense heat seemed to have paralyzed all animal life in the Bush on this day. Nothing worth shooting had showed itself, except a lazy old kangaroo, and Harold had no inclination to carry any of *that* home, though he could easily have stopped it, either with the wire cartridge in the left barrel of his gun, or the ball in the right. A flock of white cockatoos perched on the topmost boughs of a high tree, might have been marble statuettes, so silenced was their usual clamour. A "bell-bird" flitted over his head with one faint "tinkle-tinkle," and passed on in the direction of the creek. The shrill hum of the cicadas, even, rose and fell feebly, and Harold, in-

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fluenced by the universal drowsiness, sat down in the shade of a gum-tree's broad trunk, with Don at his side, and the gun on his knees, and fell asleep.

Half an hour might have passed, he could not tell; but he was roused to sudden consciousness by the dog scratching his arm, and growling in a low tone. He looked in the direction of the steady gaze of the dog, now standing with his legs rigid, his bristles up, and his lips curled.

"Down boy; quiet now. What is it?" he said, under his breath. A slight movement of the grass twenty or thirty yards off, where there were no sheep. "Ah," he thought, "Mr. Dingo creeping up," and fired the wire cartridge at the spot. But Don knew better from the first. A black fellow sprang from the ground, ran some little distance, and fell. Harold felt bewildered, but instinctively recharged the empty barrel, while Don's eager desire to go in chase was checked by an imperative "No—down charge. You don't go after *that* sort of game, and get a spear into you, very likely.

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The brute," he soliloquized, "sneaking up on that side, so as not to disturb the sheep; and then, if he *had* speared me, good-bye to the whole flock. I dare say there are more of them about; but they won't care much to show their skins after that warning," and he moved off towards the flock, keeping a sharp look-out all round. The sheep rose leisurely by twos and threes, then in bunches of a dozen at a time, as he advanced. It was certain that no Blacks had been among them, and, after all, perhaps the fellow who stalked him was a solitary individual out hunting, and thought he had good chance of plunder.

Counted into the yard, the number proved correct; still, Harold could not but feel some uneasiness. After supper, then, he put up a couple of sheets of bark and some boughs against the fence inside the yard, to keep off the heavy dew, and, taking his blanket and revolver, made himself comfortable for the night. Here any movement of the sheep would instantly put the garrison of the castle on the alert and ready for action, while Don would

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assuredly keep one watchful ear open for all comers. This he thought the safest plan to adopt, until he could ascertain from Mr. Gray, or the ration-carrier, whether the Blacks were encamped in force on the run; for he had seen no one within the past fortnight.

Not long after this unsuccessful attempt of the enemy, the cheerful voice of Mr. Gray, waiting at the yard to count in the home-coming flock, greeted Harold with a hearty laugh, and "What the deuce have you been doing, Bertram, with that shanty in the yard—practising building a 'gunyah,' eh?"

"Oh, it's scarcely worth while to mention it; but I saw a black fellow out on the run the other day, and I thought, if there were more, and they had an idea of rushing the yard, a few pellets of cold lead from inside might 'make a divarsion.'"

The squatter listened with a grave face to Harold's narrative of his encounter, and said, "Depend upon it, you had a close shave. Now you must come out of this to-morrow. I've got two men to take your flock; and we'll

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build a second yard here next week, and put in five hundred more sheep. The two chaps will be company for each other; and those prowling devils shall see that we mean to stand none of their nonsense. I haven't heard anything from the other men. I don't think, either, that there's a camp on the run. Keep the sheep in for an hour to-morrow till I bring the men over, and the horse-dray with the tools. Then we'll set to work getting the new yard up. Good night." And the squatter rode off home at a sharp canter.

The two new hands were sent out in the morning with the flock, Mr. Gray, Harold, and "Long Tom," making a busy day of it, cutting and carting poles and stakes, and laying down the framework of the enclosure. Three days' hard work from sunrise to sunset completed it; and Harold, putting his traps and specimens on the dray, removed to the head station, reflecting, as he turned a lingering look on his recent home, that a man's lot might be cast in many a worse place than the seven-mile hut.

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CHAPTER V.

Charlie Keene's Letter, and what came of it—Harold becomes a Partner in Burra-Burra—Off to the Expedition Range—Meets an Old Rugbean—Edendale—Mustering Sheep for the Journey—The Start—A Snake in the Fire—Tom's Supper—Packs and Pack-horses—A Sandy Desert—Crossing the Mooloolah.

A FORTNIGHT after Bertram's return, a letter arrived from Charlie Keene, bearing the Roma post-mark, more than two months old, whence it had been passed on from station to station, and forwarded by any dray that happened to be going somewhere in the direction of the Barcoo. After a description of the gaieties and amusements of town life—the picnics to Oxley Creek and Bulimba, yachting trips in the bay, drives to Enoggera and Kelvin Grove; garden-parties, balls, and receptions at Government House, etc., Keene went on, "I'm quite the 'Bushman' here, if you please, among the Piccadilly lounger

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young chaps come out to turn themselves into 'squatter kings,' right off—though they haven't managed to tear themselves away from the billiard-tables at Mason's and the stout and oyster-rooms in Queen Street yet. I *do* cram it on. Quite an authority on camping out, mustering, stock-riding, buck-jumping, and the rest of it—not a whisper about store-keeping and butchering, no, not if I know it; and they stand their bottles of 'sham' freely, just to hear me 'blow.' Comical, isn't it, Hal? How you'd chuckle if you heard the late grocer's apprentice to Donald MacNab, *Esquire*, on this sort of swagger. But I take a squint round now and then, and if any chap with a ragged Crimean shirt on, a battered old cabbage hat, moleskin trousers, and leg-boots (never seen the blacking-brush for years), and a dirty pipe in his mouth, saunters in, I'm off, with 'Good morning, I've a particular engagement'—sharp *you* bet.

"Now to business. If you think you've found a suitable partner by this time, here's a draft agreement, covering the whole ground.

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You can strike out what clauses don't apply to your case; and here are the terms on which you can get an advance on stock, wool, etc., when your present capital is invested. You spoke well of Gray. He's known here as a steady, straightforward, business man; and his credit is good, because he owns everything. By-the-by, MacNab is only 'caretaker' for a widow lady living in Ireland, whose husband died some years ago, and hasn't got a sixpence in Wallaroo. Mac was a broken-down grog-shanty keeper, near Ballarat, and they say he threatened to marry the widow and the station at one fell swoop; but she got frightened and bolted, leaving him in charge, somehow; then he took to wife (or else re-discovered) the Mrs. MacNab of our acquaintance—not a bad sort, though she would never give me more than half an inch of tallow-dip to go to bed by. We find out all these things down here—it's business. And the way he crammed it on to you, and me, and Bill—the swilly old rubbish! Gray's wool is a fair brand in the market, clean and strong, but they say it want's refining.

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You know by this time what sort of country it is, and all about the stock; and if *you* don't, nobody can tell you. So, supposing you make up your mind to 'plunge,' I say good luck to you, old man; and good-bye, until we meet in Brisbane, about the 'Ides Calendariis,' or something of that kind. Don't laugh at my classics, if they're not quite up to the mark. I mean all for the best.

"Ever your chum,

"CHARLIE KEENE.

"P.S.—Some day you'll be wanting another sort of partner in the sheep-farming business. There's a slashing fine girl in our set here, on a visit in Fortitude Valley. Just suit you. She's a dark chestnut, with white points (I mean hands), neat, compact hoofs, and a blaze —no, a blush, of pink on each cheek. Stands thirteen two at the shoulder, 'warranted sound in wind and limb.' I should think she was! Swims like a fish, I'm told, and I know she dances like a sylph, plays 'divinely,' sings like a nightingale, and rides—why, I expect she'd

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be quite comfortable on your friend 'Bendigo.' No, Hal, I'm not in love with her—she's too grand for me; but there's a little girl who—well, I mustn't anticipate. The girl I mean for you was born and bred on the Darling Downs, and is the daughter of a big squatter. She's well educated, 'thoroughly domesticated,' and not a bit flash. Come down and see her when you're settled. She stops here every summer for about two months; but she told me that she always 'longed to get back to the glorious Bush.' Don't be too long about it. Such a plum is sure to get snapped up, though I hear she has refused two or three good offers already, and she's only nineteen! There's something for you to think of when you feel lonely.

"C. K."

Harold read the postscript with an amused smile. How many years might it be before *he* would be in a position to offer a refined woman a suitable home? How would such an article as a piano ever be brought to the Barcoo on a bullock dray? And, glancing over the letter

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again, he muttered to himself, "Why, confound the fellow, he's not even mentioned *her name!*"

Mr. Gray listened attentively that evening while Harold broached the question of partnership to him, and showed him the papers enclosed by Keene and Co. Looking through the draft agreement, he observed that it was "fair, though stringent." "But it's best to have no possible misunderstandings. They propose to tie *me* up tight enough, and there's no room for *you* to squirm out. This is my position now. Two thousand pounds saved out of the wool, to cover emergencies, and the station not a penny in debt. Your £4000, added to my £2000, would give us a start with eight thousand good ewes, a few first-class rams, and something for the first year's working expenses, huts, and so on. If necessary, I could get an advance of £10,000 any day on half the stock now on the run; but, 'sure and steady' is my motto. Gradually stock the whole block, and find out by degrees what it will carry well and safely, for it's a mistake to send half-starved wool to market. We should have to enlarge the wool-shed. I should

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like, too, to get up a hydraulic press, and do away with that clumsy old beam. It turns out such loose bales, wastes time, and nearly doubles the cost of carriage. Then you'll want a decent shanty put up out on that salt-bush country, and a small stock-yard and paddock. It runs into the cash when you come to plan it out for six or seven flocks, and the increase. Well, we'll go through the books to-morrow, and make out an estimate."

Everything proving in good order, Harold had no hesitation in deciding to invest in a share proportionate to his capital. The deed was therefore signed and witnessed that evening. Gray wrote to his agents and bankers in Brisbane, and Harold instructed Keene and Co. to do the necessary financial business for him. The dray was to be despatched at once to a small township halfway between the Barcoo and Rockhampton, where a consignment of flour and other stores was expected to be waiting, and the bullock-driver was to get the letters off from the nearest mail-station on the road.

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To the north-west of the Expedition Range, some two hundred miles east of Burra-Burra, were several old-established sheep stations, where stock of a quality much superior to any on the Barcoo was bred, and from these it was decided to procure the new stock. The responsibility of selecting the sheep and bringing them home was entrusted to Harold, whom Mr. Gray furnished with letters to the squatters from whose flocks the drafts were to be made, an outside price being fixed for the ewes and rams respectively.

"They won't be able to stick you with toothless grannies now, Bertram, even if they had a mind to; but they're not the sort to try that on. Still, of course, they're not likely to be very anxious to let you have the pick of the run, unless you show them that you mean to. So don't be in a hurry. Take a good look round; do the drafting carefully, and, if there's one with a sign of scab about it, out with it. If you manage to be home within a couple of months, you won't have done so badly."

With these parting words, while Harold was

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saddling up, his partner wished him a hearty "good-bye." Mrs. Gray and the children waved their hands to him from the verandah as he passed the house; Don, always delighted to be on the tramp, careering in circles in front of the horse, barking joyously; and Long Tom, who was to be his companion and guide on the expedition, joined him outside the slip-rails.

Tom was a trustworthy fellow, a good judge of sheep, and thoroughly familiar with the country between the Barcoo and Rockhampton, and the whole of the Leichhardt district, drained by the Fitzroy and its tributaries, the Mackenzie, Dawson, Isaacs, and the network of creeks which linked them together. Born in a shepherd's hut during the early days of squatting in the Leichhardt (when "we used to pisin the —— Blacks like dingoes," as he would say with a chuckle of satisfaction), Tom was a true "corn-stalk," lengthy of limb, wiry of frame, and capable of great endurance. He had never been inside a school in his life, perhaps had never even seen one, and amidst the active occupations of the Bush had not found time or opportunity to pick

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up the very rudiments of reading and writing. His mind, an absolute blank so far as all the knowledge which makes a civilized man was concerned, had absorbed all the craft of the wild man of his native country, from constant association during his boyhood with the young aborigines in their hunting and birds'-nesting expeditions. He thus became as expert as any of them in the use of their weapons, and so familiar with their language that, until he had almost reached the age of manhood, when the country had grown more settled by white men, English was difficult to him, as a means even of ordinary communication.

Harold had frequent opportunities during the journey of observing the man's peculiarities of speech, which reminded him of the soft, rolling tones of the aborigines—like liquid bubbling from a long-necked bottle. The first night they camped out, Harold was startled from sleep by what for the moment seemed an angry discussion between two black fellows; and he had his revolver half out of the case before he realized the fact that Tom, lying

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asleep on the opposite side of the fire, was holding forth in the aboriginal language—a proceeding which Don evidently regarded with surprise and disapproval. This occurred on subsequent occasions, too, Tom always recurring in his sleep to that which had been practically his mother-tongue throughout the years of his boyhood.

The roads being good and the weather fine, they trotted into the little township of Springsure on the afternoon of the fifth day, and went straight to the general store—the centre of all business and gossip, and the rendezvous for visitors from the surrounding country.

On the counter sat a young man of about twenty-five, rather flashily dressed in the neatest of Bedford cords, with well-polished riding-boots, bright spurs, a scarlet silk sash round his waist, and a brown "deer-stalker" hat set jauntily on the side of his head. He was swinging his legs, tapping his boots occasionally with a hunting-crop, and chatting with the store-keeper, while he sipped at intervals the contents of a large tumbler of "Bass," and puffed a cloud from a silver-mounted briar-root.

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"What? No—surely—yes, by Jove, it *is!*" he exclaimed, jumping down and seizing the astonished new-comer by the hand. "Hal Bertram! Don't you recollect me?"

"Y-e-es," hesitatingly ("I fancy I've seen you somewhere before," was on the tip of his tongue, when recognition flashed upon him). "Why it's— How d' y' do, Pat? The last man I should have thought of seeing out here!" returning the other's greeting with a hand-grip which made the slighter man's frame shiver.

"Let's drink to it. Two more bottles of 'Bass'"(to the store-keeper), "only ten shillings a bottle—*Floreat Rugbeia*—ha, ha, ha! I didn't mean a pun, though," cried the impulsive Mr. Patrick Sullivan, flinging his hat up to the rafters of the store.

Sullivan had been Bertram's football captain at Rugby years before, and a very martinet on the playground in all matters of discipline; but he was liked and admired for the dash and good judgment combined which so often carried his team to victory.

"Well, well, you *have* altered, though,"

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observed Sullivan, putting his hands on Bertram's shoulders and surveying him up and down. "Such a lump of a fellow—I should never have known you but for your face, that's just the same—set up like a young bull, you are. What a demon you'd be in a scrimmage now. I wouldn't stand up to a chance of a drive from your left for the best buggy team in Queensland. But, tell me where you are, and all about it."

Harold gave him a rapid account of his affairs, and of the business he was on at present, to which Sullivan replied, "You must come over to my place—Edendale—about ten miles off. I'm 'Super' there. Come on; climb up that old crow-bait you've brought from the Barcoo, and we'll show you some *horses* up at the Dale."

The two friends rode off, chatting about the old times, followed by Tom, who had crammed as many "nobblers" into himself as he possibly could during the past half-hour, sitting none too steadily in the saddle.

"But how come *you* to be in Queensland?" asked Bertram. "I thought, after taking that

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scholarship, you were going up to Oxford or Cambridge, and then into the Church."

"So I was, but on due reflection I arrived at the conclusion that it was scarcely my mission, and the Dad didn't take it kindly; so I shipped out here, met with a first-rate fellow, Frazer, the owner of Edendale, and, when I had been four years on the station, he took it into his head to run me into this billet; and I'm manager while he's in England. If all goes well, he won't be in a hurry to come back, he told me. You've forged ahead of me though, Bertram. A full-blown squatter! Why, I shall have to worry through on my three hundred a year for the rest of my days, unless the old folks at home make up their minds to sell the family living, and send me the cash. Here we are."

Everything about Edendale struck Harold with a sense of lavish expenditure and luxury. What buildings—stables, wool-shed, store, and dwelling-house! How spick and span, substantial, well-ordered, and suggestive of wealth! He felt a hesitation in treading on the carpet as Sullivan threw open the verandah window; and

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sat timidly down upon the morocco leather-covered arm-chair, which his host pushed towards him carelessly with "Make yourself at home, old man; dinner in a few minutes."

A spotless white table-cloth, and plate (it might be silver, for all he knew), ivory-handled knives, blue-and-white china, cut glass, napkins beside the plates, and, above all, a female servant to "wait!"

"You must be off your feed, Bertram," observed Sullivan, when they had been seated a few minutes; "not getting on at all. Put a tumbler of that sherry into you—good dry stuff, wouldn't hurt a baby."

Harold laid down his knife and fork, laughing heartily. "It is comical; but I can't help it. For the last two years and more I've eaten my 'dinner' with my belt-knife, off a tin dish, and now to tumble suddenly into all this! It's a considerable pull-up, I can tell you; but I shall get used to it by-and-by. It wouldn't surprise me to see a fellow in swallow-tails walk in with a lady in a low-necked dress on his arm."

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"You might have seen *that*, too, last autumn, when 'the family' was here. Miss Frazer always insisted on her father cramming himself into an old-fashioned dress coat ('to keep up the traditions of civilisation,' as she said), and you would have laughed to see him pull the thing off and fling it into a corner the moment I had bowed her into the drawing-room and shut the door. Have a weed?"

"Thanks. I haven't yet got into the habit of everlasting smoking, though it is a great comfort sometimes, I own; and one can only get that Victorian plug, which is enough to shatter the nerves of a rhinoceros," lighting the cigar.

"Nerves be hanged! If any man in Queensland has the nerves of a whole herd of rhinoceroses—no; forgive me, the classic muse; rhinoceri—it's Harold Bertram, I should say! Did you ever try a buck-jumper?"

"Yes, a few bad ones, out west; perhaps they're *worse* here. I'll try, to-morrow, if you like."

"I'm not so sure about accepting that offer,

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Bertram. It won't do to have you pulling the heads clean off *my* buck-jumpers—as you would, if the bridle didn't break—and spoil all our fun with the cocky 'new chums' when they come round here to 'try a horse or two.' Now, 'shatter your nerves' with a tot of whiskey before you go to bed."

Sullivan went on to describe Edendale.

"Frazer took up this country fifteen years ago—the books are in the office, behind, covering the whole period—and worked hard on a small capital. He hammered away for ten years, and then felt himself safe. We work the station now at high pressure, breeding the best stock for buyers of sheep and horses, and our wool has no second in the market. He nets about £10,000 a year from it—ah, I see, you're yawning. Here's your room."

Harold looked into the luxurious apartment, furnished with every convenience—from the washstand to the window-curtains, the bright fender and fire-irons, mantel ornaments, etc., to the bedstead, with its sheets, blankets, counterpane, and mosquito-netting.

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"If you don't mind, Sullivan, I'd rather not stop" (surveying the room uneasily) "in here. It seems close. I should catch cold, sleeping in that bed, I really believe."

"All right, my boy, 'Liberty Hall,' this; do what you like."

"Then I'll sleep on the verandah in my own blankets. My swag is out there with the saddle."

"Good night, then," said the host. "You'll astonish my pet magpie when he comes to pipe me up at daylight, and look for his breakfast."

The beams of the rising sun had just fallen slantingly on Harold's face, when the "magpie" perched himself at a respectful distance on the edge of the verandah, and rolled forth a stream of flute-like notes unintermittingly for some minutes, while the intruder on its domain lay quietly listening and enjoying the full rich melody of the voice. Presently, Sullivan came to the window and threw a piece of raw beef, which the bird caught dexterously in his bill, and carried away to discuss on the garden fence.

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A swim in the clear waters of Ghikhon Creek, a hurried breakfast, and then down to the stables with their saddles, where Sullivan selected for his guest a powerful iron-grey.

"There; can't come up to that on the Barcoo yet—eh? He's one from a half-bred Clydesdale mare and an Irish hunter; about the best strain we have. Mind—he's a devil of a handful for the first few minutes; but no vice. Hadn't you better have a Pelham?"

"No; I always ride with a common snaffle—even buck-jumpers"—with a short laugh. "I and *this* fine fellow are not going to fall out."

"Come along, then," said Sullivan, jumping on to a compact Suffolk punch, "we'll run through the brood mares' paddock first." And, after an interval, during which Harold was getting on terms with his mount—"Humph; if you fellows can't breed *horses* out on the Barcoo (judging from the miserable crocks you've brought down), you learn to *ride*, at all events."

The young Super piloted his friend over the run, descanting on the merits of the "beauties," with their foals running by their side; recount-

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ing the names of crack steeplechasers, which had carried the fame of the Edendale stud to Sydney, Melbourne, and even to India; expatiating on the importance of refining stock at any cost; of fencing and paddocking the run; of laying down artificial grasses, storing water, and a host of subjects connected with sheep-farming on the most approved principles.

To Harold's eye, accustomed to open country, with a free range right away to the shores of the Indian Ocean, the frequent fences and enclosures were bewildering, and he was not disposed to be incredulous when he was told that, what with the boundaries and paddocks, there was something like a hundred miles of fencing on the run.

Sullivan evidently knew his business; although he remarked that the station was so well planned and arranged that "any fool could keep it up to the mark."

"It's only a small place, you see, Bertram (under two hundred square miles), but a real 'nugget.' All the stock first-class. Now, have a look at these," taking down the slips of a

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paddock in which a flock of five thousand young ewes ran, without a shepherd.

They were some little time finding the flock, which at the first sight of the horsemen set off at a gallop, but eventually allowed themselves to be approached.

"I can let you have two thousand of those; and perhaps you'd better muster here all you buy elsewhere, and start when you have them all together. I can find you grass for a week for them in two or three mobs. Your lot shall be drafted out to-morrow, when you can inspect them, and see whether you like the quality, and I'll have some rams (three parts merino) brought up to the yards at the head station, and pick you out a hundred and fifty. The overseer shall go into the township to-morrow, and get you three or four shepherds for the journey. I dare say he'll manage to rake some out of the 'pub.'"

Within a week, Harold had collected the total —eight thousand sheep—from the neighbouring stations, bought pack-horses, arranged for loading them at the Edendale store, and

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engaged three shepherds from the township—"A lot o' scrubbers, with on'y one 'orse an' a mangy cur atween 'em," as Tom remarked, when inspecting the contingent with which the journey was to be made.

All his business arrangements completed satisfactorily—thanks in no small measure to Sullivan's help and knowledge of the surrounding stations—Harold rose before dawn on that brilliant winter morning, near the end of July, set off with his men and pack-horses, and waited some two miles from the station on an open flat, where the muster was to be.

"Here they come—full tear," observed Sullivan, as a cloud of dust at length approached, and the leaders of a mob of four thousand strong sheep came galloping towards them, the broad line of bobbing heads advancing like a wave about to break on the seashore. Don was sent to race to and fro in front of the line, and his efforts soon brought them to a standstill. Then the line widened out gradually on the flanks; the new-comers wondering what had stopped their companions;

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and a *posse* of mounted men could be dimly discerned through the dust in the rear.

"I don't envy you your job, Bertram," said the Super, with a shrug of his shoulders; "to march that lot close on two hundred miles at this season, with the grass dried to powder on most of the road which you'll have to travel. They'll be as thin as hurdles by the time you get them to the Warrego ranges, unless you go out of your way, and poach on some fellow's carefully preserved burnt feed. At all events, we'll see you safe camped down to-night, and I've men enough here to take care that none of these lively youngsters break back home before you get them well in hand."

Half an hour passed in desultory conversation, while Sullivan began to be impatient of the delay in bringing up the other half of the mob, which was in charge of his overseer. A restless movement, however, of the sheep called the attention of the men to them, and the whole flock turned towards the direction from which they had come. Another whirling cloud of dust in the distance, a general stampede, and

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the two mobs rushed together, impelled by that singular instinct which prompts sheep which have never seen one another in their lives before, to pretend that they are inseparable friends, and greet one another with such effusive cordiality.

"They're pretty considerably 'boxed' now," observed Harold to Sullivan, while they sat watching the intermingling of the two living streams, and waited for the babel of bleating to moderate before sending out the men on the flanks and bringing up the rear.

Sullivan expressed great admiration of Don's work, and said that he would willingly give twenty pounds for "one of that sort," if Harold could send him one in charge of a bullock-driver to Springsure.

Don's master shook his head. "You can't *buy* such a dog. You must *make* him."

After much shouting and running hither and thither, the unwieldly mass of sheep was gradually got into a solid phalanx, and moved forward, it being Harold's intention to tire them by a long march of twelve miles the

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first day, so that they would be the more inclined to camp quietly, and feed when started on the following morning. As Sullivan had anticipated, the men he brought to assist proved none too many for the work. At frequent intervals it would suddenly occur to the whole mob that they were going from home, and with one impulse turn and make a wild rush to break through the rear-guard; when, with much "shouting, swearing, and nauseous words past mentioning or bearing," they were swept round on a semicircle of half a mile, and brought once more to the right direction. Towards afternoon, however, the chariot-wheels of the cavalcade could be seen to drive heavily, and the largest proportion, after a drink at the little creek near the camping-place, lay down to chew the cud of the scanty blades of grass which they had cropped by the way.

Here Harold and his friend parted, with mutual good wishes and assurances that they would "look one another up" whenever an opportunity occurred; Sullivan riding off to Edendale with his men, while Harold set to

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work at the important task of forming his camp. Pack-horses were to be unloaded, hobbled, and turned out; the stores carefully sheltered from dew beneath the tarpaulins; watch-fires to be lighted at several points round the sheep, and arrangements made for keeping two men on the look-out and moving constantly round them throughout the night. One of the new shepherds, professing himself a "cook," was charged with the preparation of the evening meal—a cold leg of mutton, a hunk of excellent salt beef, and a four-pound slice off the big damper which Sullivan had thoughtfully included among the other eatables, in order to save the party the trouble of cooking for the first two days. Afterwards they must kill their meat as they wanted it, and trust to the best man among them to do the baking.

Harold passed the night in visiting the men at the watch-fires from time to time, for any sudden alarm might start the sheep in a body; or, at least, after they had rested they would become troublesome. The moon enabled the men to detect parties of from a dozen to a

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score stealing off at different points, and all heading with wonderful unanimity to the eastward. These were stopped and turned back as quietly as possible. Don, conscious that these paddock-bred sheep were unaccustomed to a dog, working cautiously, in order to avoid scaring them.

As soon as it was possible to see in the morning, all hands were roused, the billies set to boil, the horses collected and packed—always an undertaking of some difficulty, vexation of spirit, and delay — each man pocketed his slice of damper and beef to munch on the way, and the bleating crowd was moved forward, while two hands remained to clear up at the camp and follow with the pack-horses. Throughout the day the sheep devoted themselves far too busily to gathering the scanty winter grass to think much of "home," and when Long Tom, who rode on to look out for a camp, selected a grass-tree flat, with a small water-hole in it, the flock gladly accepted their quarters and resigned themselves to expatriation.

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In the evening, a lively incident occurred. Harold and Long Tom sat over the camp fire, near which was stored a heap of dead logs for feeding it during the night, the other men being on watch with the sheep. The blankets were spread, saddles arranged for pillows, and everything complete for turning in until the time came to take their place with the flock. A few minutes previously, Tom had rolled upon the fire a substantial log, one end of which, projecting beyond the embers, showed a "pipe," or hollow, large enough to admit a man's hand. Tom was unlacing his boots, when an unusually violent burst of expletives caused Harold to turn sharply round, "Look at that blarmed, slithering" (epithet, epithet) "of a" (epithet) "snake," spluttered Tom, in great excitement.

From the hole appeared the head and neck of a large snake, waving about as though it found its quarters becoming too warm for it. Tom whipped out one of his green-hide boot laces, fastened one end to a long stick, and in the other made a running noose. Stretching

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out from a safe distance, he dangled the noose in front of the snake's head, adroitly slipped it over, drew the knot tight, and began to pull steadily. But the reptile was not to be drawn from its retreat. It exerted all the strength of the part of its body remaining within the pipe, and refused to budge an inch. "Stick to him, Tom, whatever you do, I'll soon tackle him," exclaimed Harold, unlacing the other boot, and cutting the lace in halves. Then, taking a fairly straight stick about a foot long, he bound one end firmly to the snake's neck and the other to its extended body near the log, cautioning Tom the while, "not to let go, for Heaven's sake."

"Bailed 'im up, to rights," grinned Tom, as the reptile, stretched between the two distant fastenings, was rendered powerless to strike. Harold, taking a firm grasp of the body, now pulled it from the pipe in spite of the astonishing resistance it offered, and threw it upon the ground. Here the brute writhed about, twisting the free part of its body, some four feet long, into endless contortions, tying itself into

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knots, and opening and shutting its vicious jaws in impotent rage.

"Chuck 'im on the fire," suggested Tom, "or I'm dogoned if 'e don't 'ook it yet," an event that did not seem improbable, as the brute kept edging away towards the Bush with increasing command over its movements. But Harold settled the matter by putting his foot upon the stick—when the body instantly coiled round his leg—cutting off the head close to the neck, and kicking it into the red-hot embers.

"Now he's settled. Five feet long, at least, Tom. I've shot a good many tiger-snakes, but this is the biggest I've seen yet. Nice thing for us if he'd got into one of our blankets in the night, and we'd happened to put down our hand to feel what it was!"

Tom grunted his assent, garnished with the choicest flowers of rhetoric to be found in the back-slums of the English language, concluding with, "Wouldn't like to eat a bit—would yer? No? Well, *I* shall; it's fust-rate, tender as chicken." Tom proceeded to cut off a chunk

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ten or a dozen inches long from the thickest part, and rested it carefully on a pile of embers.

Harold turned over the remains of the body, admiring the ivory black skin, shot with deep purple, and the broad ventral scales of the brilliant orange belly, and thinking of the mysterious power of the deadly poison carried by this most aggressive and active snake, capable of slaying the strongest bull by the puncture of its insignificant fangs.

Meanwhile Tom's roast was finished, and he seemed to be picking the flaky flesh off the bones with so much gusto that Harold ventured to taste a morsel on the point of his knife, remarking, "Not so bad; if one could only get over the idea of it being snake."

"If you don't like it, you can leave it alone. I ain't no bad judge—you bet;" and Tom continued to discuss the merits of roast snake in silence.

Tom, at all events, proved himself an excellent guide. He was never at a loss for a tolerably good camping-place, and seemed to know exactly where the best pasture was to be

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found and the crossing-place of every creek; though, owing to the dry weather, none of these had yet presented any serious obstacle to those timid creatures, the sheep, which always show the greatest reluctance to face even a few inches' depth of water.

What with delays in the morning, when perhaps a horse would be missing for two or three hours, the doctoring and padding of sore backs caused by the pack-saddles, and a host of minor troubles, the travellers could not average more than eight miles a day. The journey was less tedious to Harold than to any one else, because the whole responsibility lay upon him, and he either did everything of importance himself, or stood by to see it done. The "cook" turned out a fraud. His first (and only) damper—a sodden mass of unkneaded dough in the middle with a crust of the nature of charcoal—set the men grumbling; and Harold, knowing the advantage of keeping them in good humour, undertook the baking duty for the future. When meat was needed, he walked round the flock, accompanied by Don, just previous to camping, and

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looked out for any sheep that had fallen a trifle lame and lagged behind the others. At a sign from his master, the colley would separate it from its companions and pin it by the hind-leg. It was then killed, carried to camp, skinned, cut up, and salted as it lay on its own skin—a fresh joint being reserved for supper, and the remainder packed in the morning on one of the horses.

Although Harold generally took charge of the pack-horses, scarcely a day passed but some vexatious mishap occurred. The genius is yet unborn who shall devise a pack-saddle capable of carrying a hundredweight of miscellaneous articles—bags of flour, salt, tea, and sugar, pieces of meat, blankets, axe, frying-pan, etc., to say nothing of smaller packets of tobacco, mustard, and pepper, bottles of pickles, matches, and sundries—a saddle which shall not be liable to turn turtle under the horse's belly at any moment; whose straps shall neither break nor slip, and which shall not set up raw withers, girth-galls, and crupper-sores.

Frequently, in Australian travel, not even the vilest form of pack-saddle is to be had. The

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loads are tied on bare backs anyhow with strips of green hide, and the whole ramshackle pile tumbles to pieces when the horse breaks into a trot or rubs against a tree to scratch himself. A few vigorous kicks scatter the demoralized bundle of traps, and the horse gallops off merrily, disappearing in a thick scrub. The problem may now be stated thus. First catch the horse, then find the pack which he has left a few miles behind. On the satisfactory solution of this depends, perhaps, almost the existence of a travelling party, for they are all certain to start in pursuit of the fugitive, hoping to catch him very shortly.

Harold's pack-horses were loaded carefully every morning; but one was a buck-jumper, another a frightful kicker, and the third might be confidently expected to lie down and roll at least once a day. Consequently, time was lost, and flour, sugar, etc., from burst bags, had to be scraped up from the ground. Thus the party plodded on for three weeks more or less cheerfully,

> "Turning to mirth
> All things on earth,"

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whenever they could; and beguiling the evening with ten-times-told stories round the camp-fire.

Tom had led the party on by no means a "bee line," his principal object being to cross the creeks near their sources, though it involved some increase of the distance to be traversed. A more formidable stream, however, was now to be faced, which could be attempted by sheep only in the dry season. The river Mooloolah fell by a steep gradient from a spur of the Warrego Range, and, collecting the water from a semi-circular basin, became rapidly flooded. At the place selected (a ford much used by bullock-drays whenever it was practicable), a sandstone ridge crossed the stream, forming a convenient causeway fifty or sixty yards broad, with deep water both above and below. The river bifurcated a mile or so above this, enclosing an island, and the divided waters fell again into a single channel about the same distance below. The sandstone ridge stretched across the island, forming a similar causeway for the other branch.

The sheep had been moved off their camp in the morning—a limestone formation, splendidly

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grassed in summer, and even now affording a decent picking—on to what Tom characterized as "the most God-forgotten bit o' country this side of the Barcoo." The transition from fine forest land to the desolate tract of sand before them was astonishingly abrupt. To the north and south, the timbered country stretched away in almost a straight line from horizon to horizon, like a boundary wall of deep green foliage, and all in sight to the westward was a dead level expanse of yellow sand. Looking over this dreary prospect, Harold thought that indeed there must have been *robur et æs triplex* around the stout heart of the man who first committed himself to this sea of sand with any hope of finding a haven of rest beyond!

The sheep pounded on, half knee-deep in the yielding sand, their distress betokened by their open mouths gasping for breath, threading their way among the stunted spinifex bushes, and leaving tufts of their wool on the cruel thorns with which every plant bristled—as though this sole occupant of the desert would say, "The struggle for existence is severe enough for us;

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this is our warning to all intruders on our domain." So the sheep took it, when they tried to nibble the tiny leaves, and found a dozen steel-hard points pierce their tender noses.

After that painful struggle of four miles across the desert — the river, at last! The noonday sun is strong. The sheep rush to the low bank of the stream to slake their thirst, the hindermost almost crowding the foremost into the water, until the men and dogs extend them in a line half a mile long, and ten deep, that they may all in turn have a chance of drinking. This occupies an hour. Meanwhile, Harold walks with Tom across to the opposite bank, distant about a hundred yards, to try the depth, which proves scarcely up to their knees in the middle. The stream ripples swiftly over the sandstone ridge to the deep pool below.

"A long job it will be, anyhow, with them berloomin' monkeys; but we're bound to get it over afore night," says Tom emphatically.

From the mass of driftwood on the banks they pile up rough fences, forming a pen close to the water, into which two or three dozen

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sheep at a time can be driven from the main body, and the work of crossing the flock begins. Not one will venture to dip its toes into the water by persuasion or compulsion. A start must be made by carrying them over one by one, to induce others to join those safely landed.

Harold, Tom, and another man worked steadily for an hour, and then the whole of the lot thus laboriously transported dashed fearlessly into the water, and scrambled back to their companions, by whom they were vociferously welcomed. Provoking as it was, Harold could not but laugh at their ridiculous capriciousness. All must be begun over again. Several times the same scene was enacted, and at length the shepherd with the "cur" dog was sent to drive the sheep which were already landed away from the bank. Seeing this, and feeling their dreadful bereavement, a universal desire to join the few on the other side took possession of the multitude, and, plunging recklessly into the shallow water—as though they must now do or die—hundreds crowded into the stream, splashing and leaping over imaginary obstacles, wild with

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apprehension of the result of their desperate resolve.

Harold's anxiety now was to control the surging mass, which nearly knocked him off his legs. Don was twisted round like a weather-cock, and rolled over in the water. To stem this living torrent was impossible, but it might be guided. Presently, half a dozen sheep together would be forced into the deep water, and both Don and his master found work enough to do in saving them. Once off the crossing, the sheep, feeling the full strength of the stream, would placidly resign themselves, and go down the river to destruction. Then Harold would tackle one, and the colley another, swimming beside it, and guiding it to the opposite bank, where it crawled to land, uttering a woe-begone "ba-a." In the meantime, others had drifted a long distance down-stream, going as though they were bound on a pleasure trip, with no concern in the efforts made to rescue them. In a slight curve in the bank lay a dead tree, its branches projecting above the water, and in this three of Harold's finest rams became

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entangled. Notwithstanding the sharp snags beneath the surface, he could not see them drown; so, calling to Don, he put on a powerful side-stroke, and reached them just in time. Releasing them from the branches, he caught one with each hand by the wool, and swimming between them, piloted them to an easy landing-place below. Don, in charge of the third, frightened it so much by barking right into its ear that the stupid creature was roused to an effort, and made for the bank, which it would never have attempted to reach if left to its own devices. During more than an hour Harold was mostly in the river with the dog, swimming hither and thither, catching and landing scores of the sheep which must otherwise have been drowned; and the whole loss, so far as he could judge, did not amount to half a dozen.

Neither the men nor the flock could be travelled further after their exertions. To face the other branch of the stream was out of the question so late in the afternoon. Every one therefore, and not the least the flock, enjoyed the luxury of a quiet camp on the soft, dry sand,

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under the clear, star-spangled sky. Harold, before turning in, reminding the men, "Now, recollect, boys, an early start to-morrow, and we shall be out of this wilderness by midday."

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CHAPTER VI.

The Flood coming down the River—Imprisoned on the Island—Making the best of it—A Page from a Newspaper, and Tom's Opinion on it—Starved Sheep, and how they were Fed—An Anxious Time—The Scramble across the Western Branch of the River—Taking it Easy and Drying Up—The March Home—The Welcome at Burra-Burra—Letter from Brisbane—A certain Photograph, and Harold's Reflections on it.

HAROLD, who had the morning watch, caught his horse, saddled it, and went off to round up the sheep before the others were well out of their blankets. How glorious the morning! The disc of the sun just showing over the sandy waste which they had traversed the day before; the air keen and crisp with a slight frost; the plaintive bleating all around of the flock, rising from their beds and shaking themselves, and staring vacantly at Harold, as though this was positively the first time they had ever seen

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such a being as a man or so dreadful an object as a dog! He rides along the bank of the river to make certain that no sheep lag behind among the drift timber and reeds.

What is that? He pulls up to listen. The sheep are not rushing; there is no wind. Surely it cannot be thunder, with this sky and at this time of year. How strange! Still it increases. Now he can tell the direction. It comes from up the river; the sound fills his ears; a sullen roar like that of a heavily laden train passing over an iron bridge. It approaches rapidly, and his eyes are fixed far away on a reach of the river, across which the sun sends its beams slantingly on the placid water. Suddenly this becomes black, and a dark solid shadow rolls down towards him. His senses are almost paralyzed; he cannot move; he cannot think. The advancing mass grows greater each moment, as it comes thundering on down the channel of the river, and revealing itself—a mighty volume of water unfolding like a scroll, ten, fifteen feet high—with uprooted trees, dead logs, and branches

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whirling about lightly as straws on the smooth, curve of the gigantic wave, or plunging wildly among the seething foam at its foot.

The flood—he knows it now—sweeps on its devastating course with the roar of a cataract, and the river, brimming from bank to bank, washes up to the hoofs of his trembling horse.

During those brief moments, amazement and even terror had possessed him; so grand, so unexpected and appalling had been the march of the swift-footed water-demon.

Now roused to action, he gallops off to the camp, shouts to the men that the flood is coming. "Clear up, boys! No breakfast. Saddle the pack-horses, and follow the sheep."

Tom alone took in the situation, and—giving a cuff on the head to a gaping shepherd, with "Blast yer, yer fool; you'll be drowned, don't yer know, and sarve yer right"—helped Harold to collect the sheep, and drive them off with the utmost speed to the other branch of the river.

The men rode to and fro, urging the great flock on by every means in their power, Don,

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even, understanding so well the necessity for haste as to give many a laggard a sharp nip on its hind-legs. Only two miles to be covered: could it be done in time? Harold's mind misgave him; yet there was a chance, as Tom told him that the branch made a wide bend near the upper junction, and they hoped the main channel might have led off the greater part of the flood-water.

They reach the bank. It is too late! Although the channel here is small, that racing stream of brown water, rising in a great angry wave, where it checks for an instant on the shallower sandstone ridge, would sweep an elephant off its legs.

"Bailed up; by thunder we are," Tom remarked laconically, proceeding to make the best of matters by cutting up a plug of twist.

After some little consultation, Harold rode round to explore the limits of the island which must be their prison until the flood should subside. A strip of almost barren sand, scarcely a couple of miles long, and about the same in breadth. The only vegetation tufts of

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wiry rushes scattered along the banks, and a few stunted blue gums and ti-trees which had struggled into existence on such soil as had gathered here and there from decayed drift-wood. And on this eight thousand sheep must be kept alive by some means! He looked up at the branches of a tree, gnarled and twisted out of their graceful lines by starvation, and there, above the level of his head, hung the drift material, left by a flood which must have swept the island from end to end at no very distant period. This filled him with grave anxiety. Should the water now rise to anything approaching that height, not a man of his party, none of whom could swim, would be saved; and, though he called to mind many a successful contest with the fatal waters of Sandford Lasher, it was easy to see that the strongest swimmer in the world must be knocked about like a cork among the dead timber now coming down the raging torrent of the Mooloolah.

Rejoining Tom, he found little consolation in learning his opinion that "the wust was to

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come." In the afternoon it began raining heavily, with a strong wind. Every man was set to work stripping the bark off the miserable trees, and covering the packs as far as possible under such narrow strips as could be collected from this source; while each man constructed for himself a rough shelter, consisting of three pieces set on end, inclined to an angle at the top, and kept in position with driftwood, which afforded shelter of some sort for his saddle and blankets, and room for himself to crouch beneath. In front of each of these "gunyahs," a fire would serve to keep at least one side of his body supplied with some warmth during the night, if he could adopt the black fellow's plan of sleeping doubled up with his chin on his knees.

Unfortunately, the last of the damper had been eaten the night before, and to bake in the wet was an impossibility, so that they were fain to be content with the pickings from a few ribs of mutton grilled on the embers and parboiled at the same time by the rain.

The sheep presented a picture of supreme

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misery, huddled together so closely for warmth that one might have walked across an acre of woolly backs, without touching the ground. Thus they must pass the night as best they could, their noses pressed into one another's saturated fleeces, and dream, on empty stomachs, of the rich pastures far away in Edendale.

Harold's reflections were none of the most cheerful, as he sat crouched under the strips of bark coaxing the fire into a blaze every now and then. But he could not blame himself for the misfortune. No one could have foreseen the coming down of the flood from the ranges, where it had been gathering probably two or three days before it reached them; and it would not be likely to subside very quickly if the present downpour should continue. On those woolly backs almost the whole of his capital was carried. Twenty-four hours might see it all swept down the river; but not, he mentally determined, without the utmost efforts man could make to save it.

How was he to worry through the long hours of the night, with cold jets of water

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streaming through the almost useless shelter, and trickling under the bottom? Not a book to read—not a newspaper to help him beguile the time. Yes, he recollected joyfully, the paper in which the tobacco had been wrapped, when he gave out to the men their rations the day before, and which he had stuffed into his breast-pocket. A page of the *Field*, hurrah! And carefully unfolding the treasure, he was soon engaged in smoothing its damp folds and picking out the precious contents by the flickering light of the camp-fire. On one side of the sheet, reports of cricket matches, not very interesting perhaps, but acceptable reading in the circumstances; on the other—ah! here he is in clover—almost the whole of an article (and three columns, to boot,) from an explorer of some tributary of the Congo. How delightful to find himself transported from that barren sand-spit to the banks of a noble river in Central Africa, among the most luxuriant vegetation and picturesque scenery, the leader of the expedition, surrounded by a small army of baggage-carriers and every luxury of civili-

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zation! "You had fine times of it, my boy," he soliloquized as he read on, at length coming to the following passage, which fairly astounded him:—

"Never sleep on the ground in tropical climes" (well, he was only some fifty miles outside the Tropic of Capricorn), "and do not expose yourself to malaria under any circumstances. Do not allow the cool breeze to dry your clothes—which are probably wet through with perspiration—on you. Wear flannel, and have a warm coat handy to put on when sitting down. Lose no time in changing your garments after arriving at camp; and bathe in warm water in preference to cold. For African sport or exploration, provide yourself with one of Edgington's improved trestle-cots, with a waterproof sunshade, a camp table, camp chair, a portable canteen, thick, strong mosquito-curtains, an indiarubber bath, and a light tent."*

Shades of Burke and Wills, of Stuart and Warburton, who tramped across Australia from north to south and from east to west, "hump-

* Quoted *verbatim.*—A. N.

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ing their swags," through its awful desert interior; is this the way Africa is explored?

"Tom—Tom, are you awake?"

"Think I *was!*"

"Well, listen to this, then." And Harold read the passages aloud slowly, amidst abrupt comments from his auditor—

"Oh, *no;* don't have no wet things, on no account. Sit in yer skin an' dry 'em by the fire—a night like this." "Wat's a trestle-cot?" "Canteen," now *that is* a good sort o' thing to 'ave about yer." "Bathe in warm water, be blowed! 'Ave it inside yer, with a good dose o' whiskey." "Inderrubber bath—wat's that like? I never se'ed one."

"Would that style of travelling suit you, Tom? Just a *little* of it. Eh?"

"I tell yer wat, boss; if that 'ere chap was to come out to Austrilia with that bloomin' menaggery o' furniture, ee'd 'ave to sit on top of it till 'ee busted 'afore ee'd git *me* to 'elp 'im 'ump it along—that's straight. It don't say nothin' about 'im 'aving 'is *nussmaid* to look arter 'im; do it? 'Cause I say a soft 'un like

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that ought ter." And Tom huddled himself together, still growling comments on the "soft 'un," in which uncomplimentary adjectives abounded.

When Harold stood by the bank of the river at daybreak, anxious to discover whether the water was still rising, he had resolved to make an effort at all costs to pass the smaller stream that day, should the flood threaten to swamp them out. The sheep must, in that event, be left to their fate; but the men and horses might possibly struggle across.

The stump of a tree imbedded in the sand, which he had noticed the day before, still showed above the water. The river, then, was not rising, in spite of the heavy rain, which no doubt sank into the large tract of sandy country around them. He decided, therefore, to wait, and gave orders for moving the sheep about that they might pick up what they could. Before the night closed in they had cleared up every rush and reed on the island; and on the morrow all the men climbed into the trees to cut down the scanty branches, followed by the

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famished crowd clamouring for the miserable supply of food afforded by the small twigs and shrivelled leaves. The horses would have fared even worse, for they could not touch gum leaves, had not Harold given them each an allowance of three quarts of flour mixed into a stiff dough, in the big tin dish in which the cook served the daily repast of boiled or fried mutton.

The rain continued to fall throughout the night and following day, but at sunset a sudden change of wind to the south brought a bitterly cold, clear, starlight night.

They had tried the western channel of the river in the afternoon, and found it about knee-deep, with a swift stream still running.

"We must make a start anyhow to-morrow, Tom," said Harold. "Better lose half the sheep in the river, than let them all lie down and die here."

"Right you are, boss; the most on 'em do look gallus dickey, to be sure."

The camp-fires had been kept going continuously day and night with the driest logs

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that could be procured from beneath heaps of drift timber. Knowing that there was nothing to eat, the horses stood all night near the fires, their heads hanging forward out of the surrounding darkness, in a way which reminded Harold of a picture in one of his boyhood's books of the "Fakenham Ghost."

The greater part of the following morning was occupied in packing the wet stores on the reluctant horses, and forming a log approach to the crossing-place for the sheep. As the first dozen or so of the flock were carried across by Harold and Tom, they had so much difficulty in keeping their legs, that Harold was for giving up the passage for the day; but Tom, being familiar with the river, expressed his opinion that it would still be running as strongly for a week to come yet.

"Then let's buckle to, and make the best of it," replied Harold decisively.

While two shepherds kept the weak and dejected flock near the crossing, the other men slaved hour after hour carrying sheep across, until quite a large mob had collected on the

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further bank, plaintively bleating to their companions left behind. Then the whole flock became suddenly inspired with one impulse to make a rush into the river, and Harold was again compelled to swim about with Don in the ice-cold water, catching and landing the helpless creatures, which were being swept away by the strong current.

Six hours of intermittent work, during half of which Harold had been standing up to his middle, or swimming in the swift stream, saw the last of the sheep collected on the western bank of the river, with a loss of between forty and fifty; and never, since first the country was explored, had men so gladly turned their backs on that death-trap between the forks of the Mooloolah.

Another hour's march over wet sand, where the sheep, defying the thorns, snatched at the spinifex bushes as they passed, and the limestone ridges were regained. Once more heavy timber, once more tolerably firm, dry ground, and rough grass enough for the needs of the animals, and, above all, the prospect of an easy

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journey over the remaining fifty miles, without a single creek of any magnitude to bar their progress.

The camp that night presented an appearance which would have astonished any one who happened to come suddenly upon it. The men had lighted several huge fires at some distance from one another, and propped their blankets and various pieces of clothing on stakes between them, so that both sides of the articles should have the benefit of the heat at the same time.

Tom took charge of all the saddles, placing them in a circle round a fire which he disposed with consummate skill to the best advantage. The spirits of the whole party rose with their release from their critical position. Laughter and chaff passed about at any little mishap, such as the falling of a prop, and a blanket getting singed, or a pair of boots emitting the unmistakable odour of fried leather. Meanwhile the cook busied himself to provide a jubilee supper of boiled mutton and some very fair johnny-cakes, all hands feeling much satisfaction in sitting down for the first time during

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four days to something like a meal without the accompaniment of rain-drops hissing in the fire and trickling down their necks.

In the scramble to get away from the river, Harold had no time to see to the condition of the stores, which had been bundled upon the packs in the utmost confusion. He now found everything sadly damaged. All the tobacco was soddened, half the sugar had been washed out of the bags, and round the flour a thick paste had formed and dried as a hard crust. Nothing seemed to have escaped, except his revolver, securely tied up in its bullock's bladder bag, and some boxes of wax matches which he had taken the precaution to cork down tightly in a pickle bottle along with his cartridges.

Sending Tom out with the men in command of the sheep, he himself remained in camp, and with the help of the cook passed a busy day repacking the stores as far as practicable, and getting the padding of the saddles as dry as possible in the sun, which for some hours before and after noon shone with all the fervour of an English midsummer.

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Now that the excitement and anxiety were over, he began to feel the effect of his severe exertions while swimming in the river and dragging the saturated sheep up the banks. It was no small satisfaction, then, to be able that night to rest his aching joints and strained muscles on a bed of withered ferns, with a really dry blanket over him. Before the night had far waned, however, he was on his feet again in the calm, frosty air, passing round the great white expanse of fleeces silently reposing under the half-light of the young moon.

With a pleasant word to each of the men at the watch-fires, he turned his steps towards the camp. Don growled. "What is it, boy?" standing to listen. Ah, the distant mournful howl of a dingo, answered immediately by another in the opposite direction. "The brutes," he muttered, "they've got on our track, and know perfectly well that the sheep are weak, and there may be the chance of a straggler to pick up. Come along, Don, we'll stop their game." And he passed the remainder of the night slowly walking round the flock,

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trusting to the dog's keen hearing to warn him of the approach of the enemy, which, however, made no further sign, beyond an occasional melancholy note of disappointment as the form of the colley showed up in strong relief when crossing the light of the watch-fires, which his master had piled up at frequent intervals round the flock and kept in good trim till morning.

On consultation with Tom, it was decided to work down the Tamboot Creek to the station, that part of the run being unoccupied, and the grass, consequently, likely to be fairly good. This determination fortunately fell in with the arrangements which Mr. Gray had made for the reception of the new-comers.

On arrival, then, within some fifteen miles of Burra-Burra, Harold despatched Tom to inform his partner of his approach. The same evening, just as the flock was being rounded up, Mr. Gray's burly figure loomed through the misty air with a shout—

"Hurrah! here we are. By Jove, Bertram, I thought it was all up with you when I heard of the floods on the east range rivers," spring-

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ing from his horse and seizing Harold's hand in his grasp.

As they walked towards the camp, exchanging hurried questions and answers, Harold stopped suddenly. "Where did you get that fine horse? I know him—its 'Boxer.'"

"Of course. I haven't had time to tell you. Your old friend Bill Humphreys lent him to me. He's staying here. Came up, looking out for a billet on his way to the north; and I expect him soon with a pack-horse and some goody-goodies my wife sent you from the store—just to give you a little taste of welcome home."

The tea had hardly begun to simmer by the camp-fire when a man leading a pack-horse, trotted up on the little grey mare that Harold knew so well, and the square-built form of Bill Humphreys dismounted full in the ruddy light, with his iron hand outstretched.

"This *is* a lucky chance, Bill, to meet *you*. But how——?

"Well," broke in the late overseer of Wallaroo; "I couldn't stand McNab any longer, and my time with him was up, so I put the

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dead finish on, and cleared out for the new north-country runs, and have a look round the Barcoo, meantime."

"Unpack the stuff, Tom, and hobble the horses," sang out Mr. Gray.

Tom was not long about a job which he anticipated would yield a good return. Presently there was spread out on the ground a thumping new damper, a baked meat pie, a tin of sardines, packets of tea, sugar, and tobacco, a bottle of pickles, and a mysterious bundle of sheepskin, with the wool inside wrapped round something.

"Here, give me that," said Mr. Gray, and, cutting the string, he carefully unwound the parcel, revealing two bottles, one labelled "Kinahan's L.L. Whiskey," the other a black imperial quart, on whose sealing-waxed cork might have been read "Port." "That's for you and the other boys, Tom," he continued, handing over the whiskey. "Mind they take a good dose of water with it, and send the cook for their share of the other things."

"My colonial oath! Here is a bully blow-

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out, boss; and we'll run it in sharp—*you* bet—and partic'lar the bloomin' bottle o' lush, wat's the right sort—I can see."

Harold, Gray, and Humphreys formed a well-satisfied trio at the camp-fire that night, drinking port out of tin pannikins, while they exchanged accounts of their recent doings.

It was well on towards midnight when Harold had completed the story of his journey from Edendale, and his companions undertook to relieve him of all anxiety by taking the two watches between then and daylight, and seeing that the men were at their posts.

The following day's move brought the cavalcade to Dandy's old hut, where a double yard had been built, capable of containing three thousand sheep, together with a half-finished verandah "house" near by, which was to be Harold's future head-quarters.

Another day's work sufficed to count out the flock and distribute the sheep to various parts of the run.

During the ride in to the head station, Humphreys having volunteered to remain behind at

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Dandy's and see that all went well, Mr. Gray took counsel with his partner in this wise: "If you agree with me, Bertram, I think it is a pity to let such a man as Humphreys slip through our fingers. I sounded him a day or two ago as to whether he would come in with us on part pay and a share in the increase, and help to make the station a big thing. He seemed to take up the idea, but I could not go any further until I had seen you."

"Nothing I should like better," replied Harold warmly. "He's a first-rate man all round—genuine to the backbone, and we can't treat him too liberally. It's the very thing I should have proposed myself, only I thought he seemed so bent on going north."

"Very well, then," rejoined Gray, "we will have a talk, and fix that up to-morrow, and, by the way, there's a letter for you at the house, that he brought on from Wallaroo."

Harold and Don were received with effusive rejoicings by the children, Mrs. Gray also congratulating him warmly on his safe return to Burra-Burra.

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Before turning in, Harold opened Charlie Keene's letter, from which a photograph fell to the floor—a half-length portrait of a young lady in a riding habit, seated, with her hand on the head of a fine kangaroo-hound, whose head rested on her knee, his eyes fixed upon her face. The short letter ran :—

"DEAR HAL,

"Hope you will like your visitor with this. I persuaded a dear old girl here to let me take it out of her album, and told her where it was going. This is the 'divinity' that *must* 'shape your ends, rough hew them how you will,' when you come down to Brisbane and see her, as you must as soon as you can tear yourself away from the glorious Bush.

"Ever your chum,

"CHARLIE KEENE."

"How charming!" he soliloquized, dwelling long on the beautiful, serene features, and finally turning to the back of the photograph, where he read: "J. W. Lindt, Art Photographer, Mel-

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bourne," in gilt letters, and nothing more. "Who *is* she? Charlie, my friend, you mean well; but I have no right to keep this. It must go back by the first chance, when we are sending down the wool, and then I will make a push for Brisbane, and who knows what may happen? But it is tantalizing; he might have mentioned her name."

THE END.

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